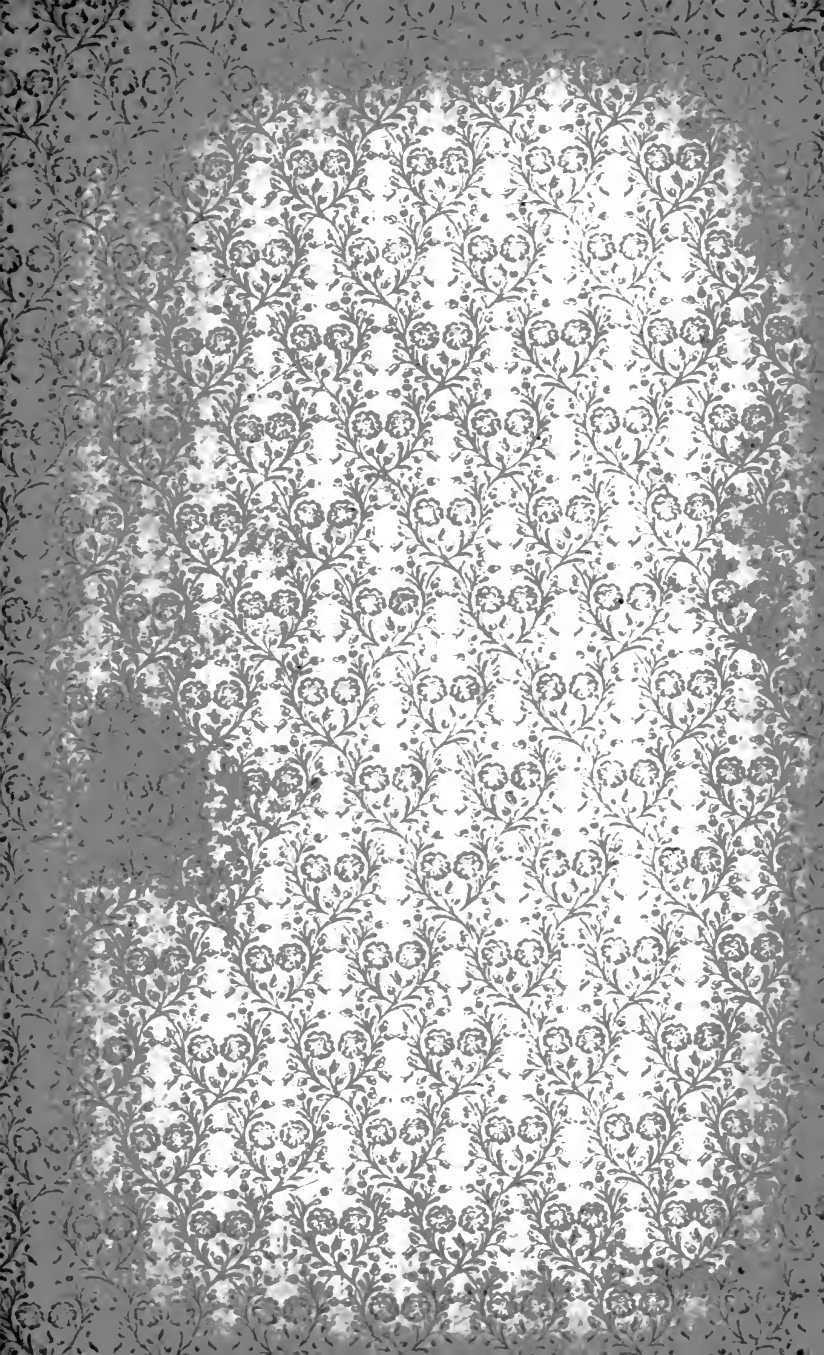
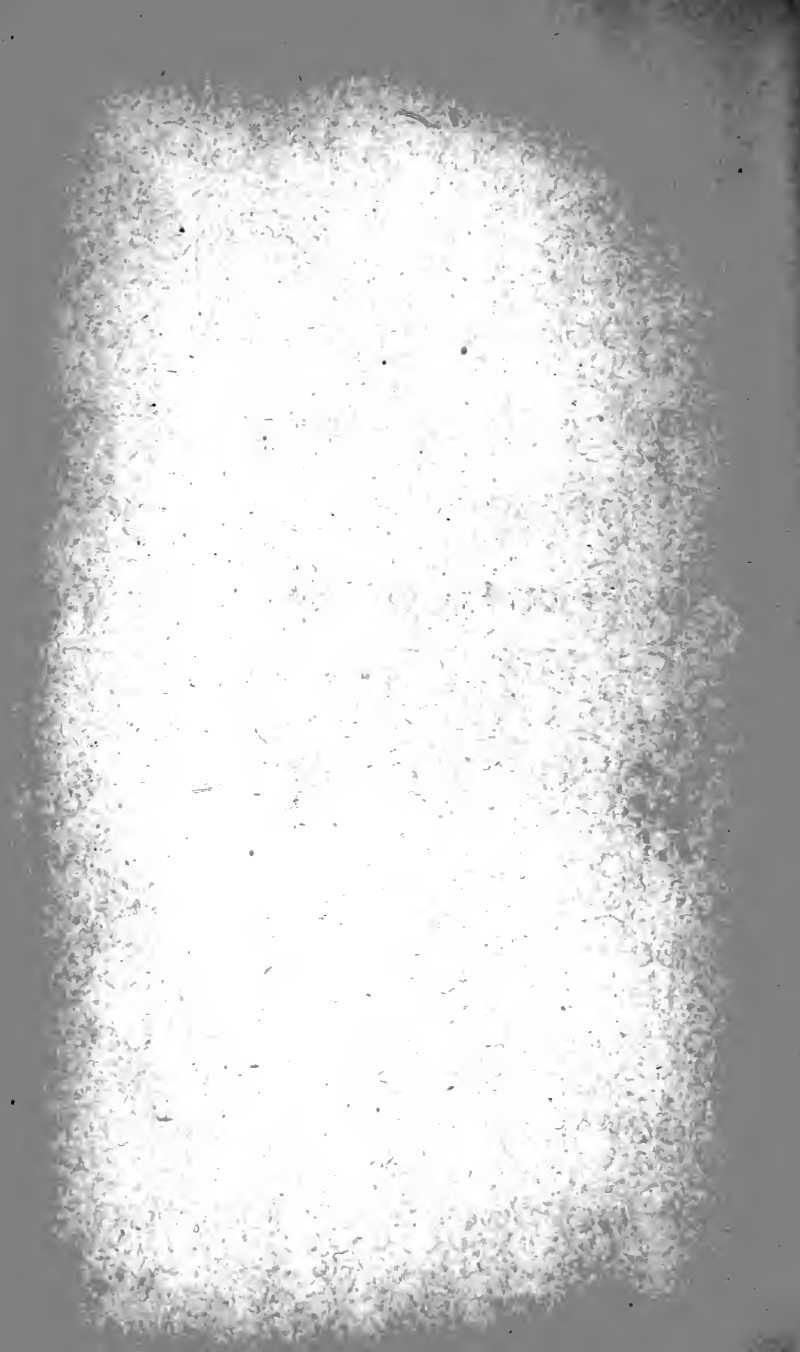


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PAUL'S SISTER

VOL. II.

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PAUL'S SISTER

BY

FRANCES MARY PEARD

AUTHOR OF 'NEAR NEIGHBOURS' AND 'THE COUNTRY COUSIN'

'No existence can be made perfect except through restraint
and sacrifice' J. H. SHORTHOUSE

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.



LONDON

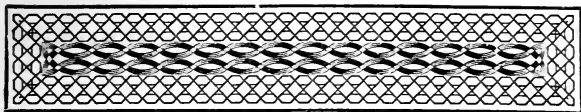
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LETTERS



PAUL'S SISTER.

CHAPTER XI.

But for the pleasure women get out of pain, there would be mighty little for them in this world.—ALFRED AUSTIN.



MORMA found herself curiously thrust upon her own reflections in the lodgings at Calais. She was a busy woman when at home, and could without difficulty escape from too urgent self-questionings by yielding to the pressure of a swarm of possible occupations. Here she had literally nothing to do except to nurse Janet, and listen to the rapturous outpourings of her

bliss, which after a while became slightly tedious; and this at a time when she would have been really thankful for a less oppressive leisure. She had heard in an effusive letter from Agnes of Mr. Lawrence's departure; between that and her mother's absence, Agnes considered herself to be in a position which demanded sympathy. Norma knew nothing of the circumstances of his going, and could only suppose that the virtue of her advice had become so clear to his mind, that he had acted abruptly upon it. But it does not take long for an impression which rests upon looks and emphasis, to become deadened, and she already doubted whether she had not deceived herself in applying so much to his.

She was sitting one day in the little room, which under its gay carpet had a red brick floor, idly watching the swift passing of tattered grey clouds of many shapes and forms across a dazzling white suggestion of

where the sun lay hid. Her thoughts were travelling on a well-beaten road, and more than once she threw back her head with impatience at her own folly. When the door opened and Miss Ellison appeared, she started up with an exclamation of delight.

‘You were never more welcome!’ she said, kissing her.

‘Then you must be in a very depressed condition,’ returned the other, with a laugh. ‘I rather expected to be greeted with the demand of why I had left my charges.’

‘Oh, your charges! They are quite equal to taking care of themselves.’

‘Since you say so, do let me give vent to my feelings. They are both so intolerably crammed with good sense that I can’t keep up to their level. I think before it is too late you might implant a few saving seeds of folly in Agnes, but Lucy—Lucy is perfect. Will it last?’

‘What?’

‘Why, my dinners and my breakfasts, and my general comfort.’

‘Ah, I can’t say. But she is far better at those things than I am,’ said Norma humbly.

‘Yes; you are not nearly so complete. However, I have a great deal to say to you, and we won’t waste time over your deficiencies. How is Janet, and what is all this that has been developed out of her broken arm? I think Lucy rather feels that she missed an opportunity.’

‘Oh, Lucy! You can never be just to Lucy!’ cried Norma with impatience.

‘Haven’t I just said that she is perfect? I am brimming over with justice. But about Janet?’

‘She is doing as well as possible. I make her rest for a little while every day, and I suspect she is asleep just now. It is rather a shame that they should all agree so readily to

this engagement, just because it is the family idea that anything will do for Janet; but meanwhile Mr. Rose, if dull, is a most excellent young man, and she is supremely happy. I have no doubt she is blissfully dreaming of her Walter at this moment. He will bear down upon us to-morrow.'

'Then come out and sit on the pier with me now. You look as if you wanted air.'

A vigorous breeze was blowing, the waves leapt against the massive woodwork of the pier, the black timbers rose sharply out of the green waters, a party of sailors were hauling barrels out of a boat, singing and laughing, and a group of children watched them with fascination; things had all a strong fresh salt look about them. Norma would not sit down.

'Let me walk,' she said; 'you don't know how restless I feel here.'

Miss Ellison glanced at her.

'Well,' she said abruptly, 'so Mr. Lawrence

is gone? Norma, when I last talked to you about him I had a dim idea that I had been a fool, but now I am sorry to say that I am quite clear on that point.'

'Yes?'

'You might say a little more than a bald yes. It is not every one who would acknowledge herself to have been in the wrong.'

'What am I to say?'

'It would be something to know whether you agree with me?'

'I don't think he is in love with Lucy—yet,' said Mrs. Winyeatt after a pause.

'Yet?—bless the woman, do you mean to force him into it?'

'No. But men change—often they don't know their own minds,' she went on a little tremulously. 'What he likes at present, I imagine, is just the pleasant kind of summer life he has been leading, in which—in which we are all mixed up. It came to him after a

good deal of rough knocking about, and it had an unexpected charm. The charm, if it lasts, may centre in Lucy.'

'My dear Norma,' said Miss Ellison sarcastically, 'I have always thought you capable of constructing very ingenious little theories, and now I am convinced of it. May I ask only one question—Do you wish it to centre in Lucy?'

Mrs. Winyeatt looked her full in the face, and her voice was itself again.

'I wish for her—for his happiness.' But the next moment, she had dropped her head and was walking swiftly on. You mustn't despise me too much, Mary,' she said; 'I know you think I am pulling first on one side and then on the other. Why, why did he ever come here?'

'To make Lucy happy, I suppose,' said Miss Ellison coolly. 'I wonder if he realises his mission? Some people are very uncon-

scientious, and it appears that you are going to be Mr. Lawrence's conscience.'

'Don't you see that it is my own I am thinking of!' cried Norma passionately. 'All these years I have carried a burden, and now I can't, I can't endure another!'

'I believe you to be a very morbid person. If your first burden was as much a delusion as this, you needn't expect any pity from me. But I didn't suppose you to be selfish. You are only considering yourself.'

'Yes,' said the other, accepting the judgment without protest.

Miss Ellison, looking at her, changed her tone.

'Do you mind telling me, Norma, whether Mr. Lawrence has not contrived to let you know that he loves you?'

'I think he—likes me,' she answered slowly; 'I think it would grow to love if—if I allowed it.'

‘Yes, those feelings generally depend upon permission. And you return, “My good friend, one object does quite as well as another; instead of myself, allow me to present you with my sister-in-law,” I think I have at last grasped the situation.’

‘No, you understand nothing—you will not understand!’ said Norma impatiently. As she spoke she struck her foot against a projecting piece of black timber, hurting herself sharply. But she showed no sign of having felt it.

‘What part of the programme have I left out?’

‘You forget that you and others have thought that Mr. Lawrence liked Lucy——’

‘That was your own fault. You have always so peremptorily forbidden our thinking of *you*.’

‘And I never intended to marry again,’ said Norma, turning away her face. ‘Re-

member that Lucy fully believed that I was—constant, at any rate!’ she added bitterly.

‘You have mourned your husband for long and weary years.’

‘That put her in a wrong position from the first. She thought we could never be more than old friends——’

‘Lucy’s wishes always mother her thoughts very nicely,’ murmured Miss Ellison.

‘And she has been perfectly frank with me. From one cause or another I have often failed in gaining Lucy’s confidence, and when at last she has given it to me, am I to turn traitor?’

‘She chose her moment very sagaciously ; oh, I have never refused her my little tribute!’ said Miss Ellison dryly. ‘She has made it difficult for you.’

‘Ah, you own that ! Then recollect that she is Paul’s sister, and that all I can do for

his memory is to devote myself to those he loved.'

'Yes. The position would not trouble me in the least, but, being what you are, I am bound to say that Lucy has contrived her complications well. Still, it does not rest quite between you and her. There is the man, and though he is a man, I suppose he deserves some sort of consideration?'

'Mary!'

'Well, he hasn't had much.'

'He has only too much!' said Norma quickly.

'It is out of reach, then—out of my reach. He has gone away; pray is that for his own good, or still for Lucy's?'

They had reached the end of the pier by this time, or gone as far as they could go, and, leaning over, looked at the rush of the flying clouds, all soft greys with lighter tufts of white scudding across them—at the

strong toss of the sea—at some odd brightly-coloured foreign craft, heavy and gay at once, which were making for the harbour—at the shadowy green water under the pier. Norma did not at once answer. Then she said suddenly—

‘You need not twit me with not caring for myself, Mary. I have tried to be unselfish, and have failed. But his going was his own proposal.’

‘I should not wonder, however, if he had asked you whether he should stay.’

‘Yes, that he did,’ said the other, with a quick blush.

‘And you said—go! And the poor man felt he had received his dismissal. This was the consideration!’

‘Haven’t I made it clear to you that I couldn’t—I couldn’t have given any other answer now? He must have time to be sure of himself. If this separation had not come

I should have made another. I will not see him, I will not give Lucy the power to reproach me.'

Miss Ellison appeared to reflect.

'Then you do not say you will never listen to him?' she demanded in a more satisfied tone.

'No—I can't!' repeated Norma passionately, 'I can't!'

'I am extremely glad to hear that common sense is to have a chance. Between romance and self-sacrifice, that poor thing does get so hustled out of the way! And what length is the ordeal to be? And how does he look at it?'

'He? He knows nothing. It is only a concession to my own weakness. I shall wait and see whether he thinks of anybody again, whether he turns to Lucy. I have fixed no time. I shall see.'

Miss Ellison looked grave. 'A dismissal

and a waiting without hope! Norma, I think you are giving too hard a test.'

'It can scarcely be called a test,' said Norma slowly. 'Do you suppose that I should ever blame him for one moment if—if I found that Lucy was right? I, who owe him so much!'

'Well, you take an odd way of showing your gratitude,' said the elder woman, with a laugh. 'However, I know very well that you must come to my age to learn to be pitiful to your poor little love stories. One sees then how easily things go wrong without our insisting upon driving them wrong oneself, and one feels impatient over misunderstandings, and scruples, and sacrifices—of other people. Yes, my dear, that's what it amounts to. However'—she leaned towards her and gave her a quick kiss—'one thing consoles me. Men nowadays seem to think themselves made for women to jump down their

throats, and Mr. Lawrence won't have that attention from you. But Lucy will make up. Shall I tell you what Lucy will do next?' Mrs. Winyeatt did not answer, and Miss Ellison went on—'She will go into Devonshire. Is Mr. Lawrence's home at all near King's Ferry?'

'I believe so.'

'Then Lucy has friends at King's Ferry, very dear delightful friends, whom she has not seen for many years, and whom she would like to meet again. Human nature is a perpetual problem! Here is Lucy, who spends day and night in making subtle arrangements for carrying out her little plans, and yet when they appear they are so transparent that a child can read through them. I don't understand it. If I took so much trouble I should produce a deeper effect, I am confident.'

'Don't let us talk of Lucy,' said Norma wearily. 'You can never see her good side.'

‘Oh yes, I can. I fancy what I have just said might be credited to her favour. And as I suppose, from going off in that hurry, Mr. Lawrence will not venture here again just yet, I am quite disposed to assist Lucy to put the question to the touch. You will have to be convinced one way or another ; so to-night I shall turn the conversation to Devonshire and the advantages of King’s Ferry. Lucy will hug me. When shall you come back? Agnes implored me to make you fix the day.’

‘On Wednesday, I think. I shall take Janet home with me ; she will have a quieter time than with her own people.’

‘And she can have Lucy’s room,’ put in Miss Ellison promptly.

No more was said between the two friends except on ordinary subjects. They walked back, and found Janet rested and rosy, and so happy that her happiness was contagious. Their early dinner came in a beautiful tin box

from the restaurant, carried on the head of a white-aproned, stubbly-headed little man, very cheerful in manner, and taking so much pride in his dishes, that Norma suspected him of being cook and master as well as waiter. He had everything spread in the twinkling of an eye, and whipped off the covers with a flourish.

‘*Pommes de terre en robes de chambre!*’ he announced magnificently, and Janet began to laugh. Everything indeed was presented to them with such an air and such a name, that they felt as if they were dining at the best *café* in Paris.

Miss Ellison went back with her mind in some degree at rest. She loved Norma very dearly, and she had been fretted with herself for what she had said on the cliff. She was fretted still, for with Norma’s sensitive and high-strung nature, words such as she had lightly uttered evidently possessed an undue

influence. She wished Norma to marry again, because she felt as if her life had been overshadowed by remorse for what Miss Ellison held to have been no more than girlish thoughtlessness. Rome, with its impressiveness, its insistent fascinations, had swept her away, had intoxicated her. Then had come a terrible shock of awakening, and what Paul had believed would soften the shock had added tenfold to its intensity. It had left her afraid, afraid of yielding to what might have been of deep interest in her life, so that though she was tenderly merciful to others, she was almost ascetic towards herself and her own impulses. If she married George Lawrence, it was certain that his sturdy character would be of the greatest service to Norma; already he had seemed to let in more air, more freedom. *If* she married—but until to-day she had hardly ventured to hope that Norma would admit the idea, and Lawrence's

sudden departure had looked like the sequel to an explanation. Now she had surprised her friend's secret, or rather Norma with her usual absolute truthfulness had made no effort to conceal it from her, had taken refuge behind no protestations. This was a great point in the perspective of the future, and brought it within a more calculable distance. As for Lucy, Miss Ellison disliked her, and was inclined to underrate her influences in the affair. It was true, as Mrs. Winyeatt said, that she could not be quite just to Lucy, and it always excited her ire if anything like a comparison was made between the sisters-in-law. Nay, she went so far as to say that a man who could think of Lucy could not be worthy of Norma. And the only thing she really feared was some self-sacrificing impulse on the part of Norma. This fear lay at the bottom of many of her caustic remarks.

One evening, a day or two before Mrs.

Winyeatt's return, the weather was thick and sultry. Agnes in the drawing-room, by the light of a lamp, was eagerly devouring a story book, while Miss Ellison and Lucy sat idly on the balcony, with no greater pretext than that of watching the Calais light. They had been silent for some time, when Lucy turned her face towards her companion.

‘How oddly things fall out!’ she said. ‘Do you remember our mentioning King’s Ferry the other day?’

‘I remember your speaking of it very well. Have you heard from your friends?’

‘This very morning. Isn’t it remarkable?’

‘Very,’ said Miss Ellison dryly. ‘I wish I could get letters by merely thinking about my correspondents. I invariably find it necessary to write first before the answer comes.’

‘So do I—generally,’ said Lucy, with a laugh. ‘But there’s something more. You

told me that I ought to see that part of the country.'

'Ah, I suppose I foresaw that you would be invited there some day.'

'Well, you were very foreseeing. I shall be afraid of you. Lena Russell wants me to come down, and stay with them.'

'And when do you go?'

'When? Oh, I have not yet even decided the whether. There are several things for and against,' returned Lucy lazily. 'Going away is always a bore.'

'So is staying at home, sometimes.'

'Yes. And my going might be a kindness to Norma if she is really about to be saddled with Janet and her blissfulness. If I go away she could perhaps induce you to stay, and that would be a real delight to Norma. You know it is a little hard upon her that you should have been here all this time. Only I am half afraid that if I—the worldly element—

take myself off, Norma and you will kill yourselves with good works in this stuffy weather. Perhaps I had better stay.'

'Ah, I don't think you will.'

'You don't think me capable of giving up my own pleasures for other people,' said the girl, sitting up and speaking in a vexed tone.

'My dear Lucy, I thought you had not even arrived at the point of deciding that it *was* a pleasure. Wasn't it to be a kindness to Norma?'

Miss Ellison was conscious that she was not behaving well. She felt a little ashamed of herself when Lucy laughed good-humouredly.

'How unkind you are! Mightn't it be both? I don't set up for absolutely unmixed motives. Really and truly, I can't make up my mind about King's Ferry, for Lena says that it is a dull place, and I can quite believe her.'

‘She offers you something more inviting than dulness, though, no doubt?’

‘Oh, she will be delighted to see me, of course,’ returned Lucy carelessly. ‘Lena always was a good soul. But, oh, dear, the country does take its amusements so seriously that I am almost frightened at the prospect! I think I should decide against it if Mr. Kennedy were not so anxious to get me away. There’s another motive, you see.’

‘Mr. Kennedy!’ echoed Miss Ellison. ‘I had no idea you were ill.’

‘I wasn’t going to have Norma worried. I have not been feeling well for some time, so this morning I just sent for him. And he is sure that a little change is all I want, after which I suppose I really ought to go. But I do wish some one would give me the necessary poke.’

‘It will come, then,’ said Miss Ellison cheerfully.

The other stared at her through the darkness.

‘Why? What makes you say that?’ she demanded.

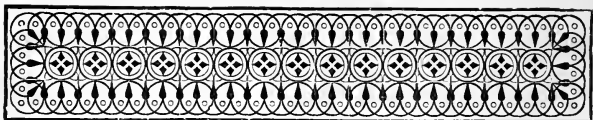
‘Because I fancy you generally get what you wish.’

‘Oh, how little, how little you know!’ cried the girl tragically. ‘The world would be a different place, indeed, if that were the case! I get what I wish!’

‘Well,’ said Miss Ellison, with a laugh, ‘you get something which does as well; and so I prognosticate that when you have made up your mind what it is, it will come.’

She said to herself that night that she was absurdly alive to Lucy’s little weaknesses; they irritated her so much that she could not resist putting her finger on each as it passed by, so as to let Lucy see that she was aware of them; and she felt as if the girl were either very good-humoured or very dense, not to take

offence. They were palpable to her, because she was always on the look-out for them, and she could not conceive that Lucy's careful little plans might have an undesigned air for those who took them naturally. She was convinced, for instance, that the doubts and hesitations would last a day or two longer, but that the letter of acceptance was already on its way to Mrs. Russell. 'Well,' she said to herself grimly, 'the man who can choose Lucy Winyeatt when he has the ghost of a chance of winning Norma, is welcome to her! He does not deserve anything better.' And she took a malicious pleasure in not carrying out one part of Lucy's programme, for in writing to Mrs. Winyeatt she made no mention of her sister-in-law, whereas she was certain that she had been intended to be the first to allude to the Devonshire visit.



CHAPTER XII.

No action, whether foul or fair,
Is ever done, but it leaves somewhere
A record, written by fingers ghostly,
As a blessing, or a curse, and mostly
In the greater weakness or greater strength
Of the acts which follow it.—*Golden Legend.*



WHEN Norma came back, Miss Ellison soon perceived that no more was to be said on the subject of their conversation on Calais pier. She was very busy over Janet and Janet's comfort, and Agnes could hardly bear to let her mother out of her sight. When Lucy announced her plans, which she described as still uncertain, but which apparently had taken a definite form, Mrs. Winyeatt listened quietly, without ex-

pressing surprise. Lucy found a little difficulty in arriving at the end of her explanation.

‘Didn’t Miss Ellison tell you?’ she said at last, hastily. ‘We talked over the pros and cons one night, because I thought if I did decide to go, you would like her to stay and help you with Janet. Otherwise I don’t think I could go away and leave you to be eaten up by Somervilles.’

‘I shall do very well,’ Norma said cheerfully. ‘Don’t think of me. Janet is a dear little thing, and I shall enjoy having her. When do you talk of going?’

‘If the thing has to be done, it may as well be done at once,’ returned Lucy. She was arranging some roses in a glass bowl, and looking at them with her head first on one side then on the other. ‘I suppose Lena would be disappointed now if I threw her over. I think I shall say Saturday.’

‘The day after to-morrow!’ said Norma in some surprise. ‘Well, of course, there is nothing against it, only I did not know you had determined.’

‘I don’t suppose I did determine, I just drifted to the point,’ the girl answered, with a laugh. ‘Sometimes things seem to drag one along quite oddly.’ She paused, and then said suddenly, ‘Norma, I wish to be absolutely frank with you.’

Something like a slight shiver seized Mrs. Winyeatt, but it had passed the next moment, and she laid down her pen and said—

‘I am always glad when you are frank with me.’

‘Well, you can’t accuse me of any lack of outspokenness about Mr. Lawrence; I have talked to you quite freely on the subject,’ retorted Lucy, still laughing, and with some apparent self-consciousness. ‘It seemed to

me necessary that we should understand each other.'

Norma was silent. She leant back in her chair with her hands clasped in her lap, and her eyes fixed upon them. Lucy glanced at her and waited for an answer, but as none came she went on—

'From something he said, I imagine that his home is not very far from King's Ferry, and it does not seem unlikely that we may meet. I don't in the least mind telling you that this has been one reason for accepting Lena Russell's invitation.'

'Have you accepted it?' asked Mrs. Winyeatt, lifting her clear eyes.

'Yes, I suppose I have,' answered Lucy, with a touch of embarrassment. 'I told Mr. Lawrence that I had friends in that neighbourhood, and he was very anxious I should come.'

She paused again.

‘Well?’ said Mrs. Winyeatt indifferently.

‘Well, I wished you to know.’

‘There isn’t very much to know, is there? I hope you will enjoy yourself to your heart’s content.’

‘That takes in a good deal,’ said the girl with a laugh. ‘Thank you, Norma. At any rate, you don’t disapprove?’

‘Ah, you haven’t asked me that! But I can’t approve or disapprove, because I don’t know all the circumstances.’

Lucy appeared to reflect. ‘I thought I had told you,’ she said. To this Norma making no answer, Lucy pulled out her flowers again and began to rearrange them. ‘I shall come to a conclusion one way or another, at any rate, and there will be no disturbing element. You’re the disturbing element, my dear,’ she added quickly.

‘So you have told me before.’

‘Yes, I thought I had told you every-

thing. You have never been so frank with me.'

A slight red flush crept over Norma's face, but she remained silent, while her sister-in-law looked at her curiously.

'You could tell me a good deal if you only would,' she said at last. 'For instance, what Mr. Lawrence said to you that last afternoon.'

Norma started to her feet.

'This is too much!' she said angrily. 'Have you no delicacy?'

Lucy quailed, for Norma's impetuous wrath always impressed her, but she had the secret gratification of knowing that if she kept her own temper, she would presently have her sister-in-law repentant for the outburst.

'You are very unkind, Norma,' she said. 'How was I to know that there was anything which we might not all have heard? I have

never for a moment supposed that you cared anything for Mr. Lawrence, excepting perhaps that if you were a little bit interested in me, you might wish to give me a helping hand. And I don't think it is anything extraordinary or—what did you say?—indelicate, if I am anxious to know whether he mentioned my name that day. But—but you quite frighten me when you are so impetuous!’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Mrs. Winyeatt in a low voice. ‘I should not have spoken so hastily. No, your name was not once mentioned.’

‘That was what I wished to know. Well, we had a good deal of talk before he left. He came early in the morning.’

And he had left no message, no word for her, nothing that could even bridge over the break in their pleasant intimacy this summer!

‘It was then that he hoped I should come to King’s Ferry.’

Norma had not sat down again; she walked to the window, came back and stood resting her hand on the writing-table.

‘Lucy,’ she said slowly, ‘there is just one thing I should like to say.’

‘If it isn’t the sort of thing you said just now,’ returned the girl lightly.

‘I have no right to interfere—I don’t wish to interfere. Your confidence, you must own, has been a little forced upon me——’

‘Forced!’ murmured Lucy.

‘—and perhaps it is only partial; perhaps you have more to rest upon than I know. The saddest part of it to me is that you tell me that you don’t love him, and yet wish to marry him. With that the case, I ought to tell you that I couldn’t put out so much as a little finger to help you, even—even——’

‘Even?’

‘Even if he loved you. And he does not.’

‘Not yet.’

‘No, not yet. It is impossible to look forward to what might come in the future.’

‘That’s where you make a mistake, Norma. I can look forward very comfortably to the future. I see no reason why he should not like me, and I like him,’ Lucy said calmly. ‘You and I are very different; you are romantic, I, practical—you impulsive, I, patient. But, my dear, don’t let your conscience be uneasy; I am going out of the possibility of being helped or hindered. You will have no responsibility in the matter. You need not care.’

‘But it is not that, it is not that!’ cried Norma. She dropped down by Lucy’s side, laid her hand on her knee, and poured out her words with her old impetuosity. ‘Dear Lucy, if you would only believe that it is of you I am thinking, that I do care with all my

heart! Don't you know what Paul's sister must be to me? Do let us bear with and hold by each other, and let no hateful misunderstanding come between us!'

Lucy slipped her arm round her sister's neck. 'Dear Norma!' she whispered.

'Don't you see,' went on Norma falteringly, 'that I cannot bear to hear you speak as you do about marriage, and—Mr. Lawrence, because it is not worthy of you or of him. If you loved each other it would be so different, it would all be straight——'

'Would it?' asked the girl, resting her head on the other's shoulder, and smiling.

'Yes!' cried Norma eagerly. 'Now it is so cold-blooded, so—oh, I don't think you really meant what you said!'

'I am too matter-of-fact for you,' replied Lucy, venturing now on a little laugh; 'but you must recollect that I see no reason why

the feeling should not be something quite different by-and-by.'

'If you would wait for the feeling!'

'Well, as I said to you once before, I am not going to marry any one by force,' went on the girl, mocking gently. Norma almost imperceptibly drew back a little, with a sense that her appeal had failed, but it did not strike her that her motive had been misjudged. 'I dare say it will all come to nothing; but if it is otherwise, when he has digested the fact that his little fancy for you is hopeless——'

This time Norma drew herself quite away; she was beginning hurriedly to speak when Lucy stopped her.

'Well, we won't talk of that. Let it be hopeless or not, he will have to come to some conclusion; and if things fall out so that he and I find we like each other—you won't interfere, will you?' added the girl coaxingly.

‘If you and he like each other, why should I interfere?’ said Norma proudly.

‘You promise?’

‘You make very odd requests. Don’t you see that I *couldn’t*?’

‘Well, remember.’

Norma reflected with a sigh that she had not got any nearer to the girl in the conversation, and she could not suppress the feeling that Lucy, when she presented her with her confidence in this matter, used it as a weapon. This did not prevent her from guarding it quite sacredly, but it kept her from taking the pleasure in it which she wanted very much to feel. She had often longed for some proof that Lucy really looked upon her as a sister, and could she but have been able to persuade herself that the girl and Lawrence loved each other, poor Norma would have trampled on her own heart without a murmur, even with a certain exultation. But as it was

now, the sacrifice had such an unworthy, such an inadequate object, that she recoiled. The spiritual force of her life protested against it. And she was too honest to take refuge in what would have been shelter to many women, the fact that she might for the present remain passive; for if a crisis came at any hour, even if it never came at all, it appeared to her that she should have made her resolution, and not act upon the haphazard of the moment. And she told herself that now, more than ever, it was plain that if—after full time had been given—if George Lawrence came back and still loved her, she need not say him nay. But if, if, if, if! What would be the upshot of these ifs?

Lucy, meanwhile, made another step on her road. She finished her roses, humming a tune as she did so, and then went her way to her own room. There she carefully chose a plain grey sheet of paper and a broad-nibbed

pen, and still humming the same air and smiling to herself, she sat down to write to George Lawrence.

She had refrained from carrying out her promise until now, because she felt sure that by this time he would be impatiently wondering at her silence; but as she was never quite straightforward with herself, she preferred to suppose that she had waited until her plans were fixed, and she could say positively that she was coming into Devonshire. Over this it was incumbent to express much surprise.

‘Isn’t it amazing!’ she wrote. ‘When you spoke of its being a part of the country which I ought to see, I am sure it seemed dozens of years away, and now it is probable that I shall be there on Saturday.’ ‘He mustn’t be too certain about it,’ she rapidly reflected, ‘for I remember once hearing him say that half the delight of a thing lay in uncertainty.’ ‘Indeed, I can hardly believe it

myself, but the friends I told you about, who live at King's Ferry, are so anxious that I should come to them that I don't like to refuse; so I have said that if I can be spared I shall do as they wish. Norma is at home again, and has brought Janet Somerville here. Janet's arm is doing as well as possible. Didn't you say that your home was somewhere not so very far from King's Ferry?' Lucy stopped to reconsider the last sentence. Finally, after a little hesitation, she passed her pen through it, and wrote rapidly in its place — 'I am sure you said you lived near King's Ferry, and I do hope near in Devonshire does not mean miles away, because I don't think I could have made up my mind to such a plunge, if I hadn't believed you would befriend me. Don't you think you might take pity and come over on Sunday afternoon, just to see if I am there or not? But, never mind, I am not going to be exacting.' She wrote a clean

copy, finished the letter with kind regards, sincerity, and all the rest of it, humming her tune very lightly the while, and smiling a little.

‘Norma is a dear good creature,’ she reflected, ‘but how extraordinarily transparent she is! A child could see through her. And so simple! I am sure she gave me all that advice without in the least realising that any one would know she had a reason for it; I dare say she did not even realise it herself. Heigho!’ said Lucy, smiling yet more, ‘I suppose the fact is that the very best of us are unconsciously selfish. I am very glad, at any rate, that I have been quite open with her, so that whatever happens there can never be any misunderstanding.’

Lucy was always careful to satisfy her conscience, and one of Miss Ellison’s caustic remarks was to the effect that she had reduced the poor thing to such insignificance that very

little sufficed to keep it quiet. 'Now Norma,' she added, 'Norma has a terribly capacious conscience.' But Miss Ellison, it must be admitted, was not always just where her affections were concerned.

Lucy and her maid departed by an early train on Saturday, and Norma insisted upon going to the station to see them off. She had thought it possible that if Mrs. Russell's house was not large, Martin might have been left behind, but Lucy had not considered this necessary. She was a little doubtful as to her quarters, and would not part with her maid. But she was very animated and affectionate, giving much good advice to Mrs. Winyeatt upon the matter of not allowing herself to be overrun by Somervilles, not catching cold, not working too hard—and Norma was really grateful for these marks of care.

'How long does Lucy intend to stay away?' asked Janet that day at luncheon.

Mr. Rose was there, and her face was a study of happiness.

‘She does not know. If she does not like it, she says she shall soon come back,’ replied Norma.

‘But I think she will like it,’ Janet ventured, nodding her head with meaning. ‘And she thought so herself, I know, for she told me so. I am sure I hope she will, for I feel as if she must have hated me for having taken you away all this time, Mrs. Winyeatt. It seems as if I had spoilt everything, and not been a bit punished myself,’ she added with a bright smile.

‘Oh, come!’ remonstrated Mr. Rose; ‘when you were the one to break your arm!’

‘But that was nothing!’—eagerly. ‘You have all been so kind and made so light of the trouble I have given you!’

‘I am trying to think whether I can’t honestly come in for a share in this gratitude,’

said Miss Ellison. 'I do like to get my good things easily. And, upon the whole, Janet, if you are so much obliged to Lucy, I don't see that I need be left so far behindhand.'

Janet flung her a blissful look.

'How funny you all are!' said Agnes, glancing from one to the other with some dissatisfaction. 'I don't understand. I thought we should do something pleasant now.'

'Why, so we will, Agnes,' said her mother, smiling at her. 'What shall it be? Shall we have tea somewhere out of doors, and call for Maggie Rendall on our way? Will that do?'

'It couldn't be better,' said the little girl joyfully. 'May we take a kettle? Where shall we go?'

'People generally go on the cliffs, don't they?' said Mr. Rose, with the consciousness that he had effected a suggestion.

'Oh, not the cliffs!' exclaimed Norma hastily. 'I am so tired of the sea! Let us

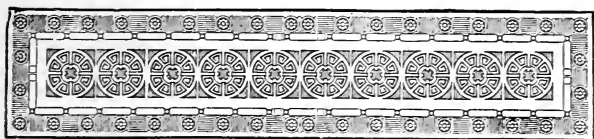
go inland and find a real green field and a few trees, and pretend that we are in the country.'

She spoke in perfect good faith, unconscious of the reason which made her at this time shrink from the places with which Lawrence was closely connected, or she might have punished herself by courting pain in the hope of curing folly. Her nature sprang readily at eager renunciation, and it was always more possible for her to rush to extremes than to move between them. She could love, dislike, enjoy, intensely, and had been so much frightened at the strength of these emotions that she was ready, if only it were possible, to pluck them up by the roots.

But if there had been something harsh and austere in her treatment of herself, there was an earnest longing and a brave resolve which kept it from sinking to an ignoble level. She had all her old sweetness, and the dis-

cipline of years had checked her impetuosity so far, that though it might still carry her away for a moment, she never lost hold over herself.





CHAPTER XIII.

Places of nestling green for poets made.—LEIGH HUNT.

Say, has some wet, bird-haunted English lawn
Lent it the music of its trees at dawn ?

MATTHEW ARNOLD.



GEORGE LAWRENCE had a good deal to harass him in his old home. The more he looked into his father's affairs, the more serious they seemed ; he found it difficult to comprehend how any one possessed of reasonable prudence could have managed to fall into such a tangle of unsound investments. The sums were not large, but taken relatively they became so, for they formed a considerable part of Mr.

Lawrence's income. How they were to live upon what remained seemed a problem to his son. His first step was to urge upon his father to make an insurance of his life, but even to accomplish so much cost infinite trouble and patience, Mr. Lawrence grumbling and postponing from day to day. He had to pay somewhat heavily, and found the outlay intolerable; indeed, if George had been less firm, he would have contrived to slip out of it at the last moment.

‘You should have made him do it years ago, mother,’ said George one evening, when the others were out, and he and Mrs. Lawrence sat by the open window. The day had been sultry, Mr. Lawrence had done his best to upset the arrangements which his son had carefully prepared, and there had been a good deal of wrangling in the house, half in jest, it is true, yet sharp enough to produce a feeling of irritation such as he disliked.

‘It was not possible,’ said Mrs. Lawrence with decision. ‘How could I ask your father to do what could only be of use to me or to Nelly after he was taken? I could not do such a thing; it would be inhuman.’

Her son looked at her in some surprise. He could have understood these scruples in some women—in Norma Winyeatt, for instance—but it was difficult to give them a place, when husband and wife were on such exceedingly outspoken terms as were his father and mother. He did not hesitate to admit the affection existing underneath, it only appeared to him as if it did not stand in the way of saying anything.

‘Well, it will be done to-morrow, if I have to stick to my father like a leech all day,’ he said at last, leaning forward and examining some letters in a pocket-book; ‘but of course, done now, when he is no longer young, the

premium he has to pay out of his small income is crippling.'

'That cannot be helped,' returned his mother courageously. 'We can live on very little, if I am told what there is to spend and am left alone. Nelly doesn't run into expenses, she cares only too little for her own appearance. She is a very good girl at heart, George, though I can see she jars upon you. Your coming has taken a load off my mind, for it wasn't poverty I feared, but the disgrace of debt. And now I trust altogether to you to let me know how much there is left.'

'As near as I can judge,' said the young man, looking up from his pocket-book, 'four hundred a year and the rectory.'

'Very good.'

'You can't live on that. Remember the parish expenses.'

'I do remember, and I can do it—if only

I am left alone. If your uncle goes about contracting debts in our name, then—I give up the struggle, and we may as well go to the workhouse at once.'

'I have spoken to him very seriously, and he vows he will be prudent.'

'Vows! You don't know him. He couldn't be prudent—it isn't in him. George, there is only one chance, you must get him to go away; and once removed from his influence, I can manage your father, I have no fears. Surely it is the hardest thing in the world that we should be saddled with him indefinitely! Surely I have a right to choose our guests!'

George shook his head. He saw his mother was trembling with eagerness.

'I can't, I really can't. Tim is so ridiculously good-natured and kind-hearted that every one supposes it impossible to hurt his feelings; but I do believe that would hurt

them beyond mending, and I couldn't do it. I'll keep an eye on him, and if I can get Nelly to listen to me, she might do a good deal. There are no debts existing at present, that I can make out.'

'That must be because you have paid them, then.'

Of this assertion he took no notice, he went on—

'I want you to understand that in future Nelly will have an allowance of a hundred a year.'

'George!'

'Out of which she ought perhaps to pay something towards her keep; you and she had better settle together how much.'

'Because we have squandered our means, do you suppose I will allow you to be robbed of yours! A hundred a year! The child would never know what to do with it.'

'Oh, she will soon learn,' he said with a

laugh. 'And she will be able to indulge Tim a little.'

'Tim! How can you put temptation in his way!'

Her son looked grave.

'Do you know you are very unjust to Tim? He would die sooner than willingly hurt any one of us.'

His mother's lips closed tightly. 'You don't know him,' she repeated, 'and your father is only wax in his hands. I tell you I will not accept that money. The parents should lay up for the children.'

'When they can. However, you've really nothing to do with the matter, my dear mother. It's Nelly's affair.'

'You may marry. What would your wife say to such an arrangement?'

'That's beyond me, I confess. Suppose we wait for the event.'

'But you may marry. I hope you will,'

his mother insisted in an excited way ; ' it is high time. Why, George, you must be seven-or eight-and-thirty, though I can hardly believe it, and do you mean to say that there is no one you care about ? '

' No, I can't say that,' he answered slowly.

Her breath quivered a little. Then she said jealously—' And you never told me ! '

' There was nothing to tell,' he said with a smile ; ' I am not going to be married, if that is in your mind.'

' But why not—if there is some one ? '

' The some one doesn't see her way to it, I suppose. It is an everyday occurrence, though good mothers like you find it hard to credit.' George spoke lightly, and hoped his mother would now abandon the subject, but she was not disposed to drop it so easily. The lines on her forehead grew stronger.

' You should have told me before, George ;

probably you have made a great mistake, knowing as little as you do about women's characters. She cannot be a very nice person if she is pretending not to like you, but I dare say it might all be put straight with a little assistance.'

'Thank you, mother ; there is nothing to be done,' her son replied quietly.

'And you will not even tell me her name?'

He shook his head, and got up. 'I'm going out for a smoke.'

'I wish you would not smoke so much ; it's a pernicious habit. Your father doesn't smoke.'

'Ah, you see I've lived too much in the East ever to get out of it again. Are you all right, or shall I pull your chair into this corner?'

He made the necessary alterations very carefully, and then strolled off by himself,

avoiding a sound of hammering and laughing, which told that Major Macarthy and his niece were engaged in manufacturing a rabbit-hutch. Such a talk as has just been repeated was of daily occurrence, and though he went through his part good-humouredly, he was really worried by the little frets which seemed to rise all round him, and to lay hold of him with their cuttle-fish tentacles. No one else thought anything of them ; to George Lawrence they were fatal to the peace and harmony which he liked to connect with the word home, and troubled him more than things of greater moment.

He was sorry that any allusion to Norma had been made. With a force of contrast which insisted upon declaring itself, and in the midst of the somewhat jangling affection in which he found himself, her image stood up warm, tender, beautiful. He yearned for her as he had not yearned before. She seemed

to her lover the very embodiment of all womanly perfection. As he strode along the narrow lanes, a square-built, somewhat rugged-featured man, no one would have guessed the passionate longing which possessed his heart. Everything that he remembered about her was sweet. He smiled with tender reverence when he thought of her struggles to do penance, as it were, for the rush of young eager life which had once swept her away; he understood, as others could not, the noble aim of self-conquest which underlaid things which might be reckoned of but small account. But since that day at Calais, to which he had carried many hopes, he all but despaired. He thought he understood, but he did not—yet. He set her on a pinnacle, this woman with a trembling loving heart, moved by him as he was moved by her, and waiting to be won.

What hopes he had were much bound up

in Lucy. For her he had a warm and pleasant liking ; and as he had thought she felt the same for him, and as he was certain that she read feelings which he was at no pains to hide, he was also confident that she would do the best for him that she could. Every day he had hoped a letter would come, with some word in it of Norma, some answer perhaps to his message, something at any rate—a break in the silence. But there had been nothing. And he could not help taking this as a very bad sign, since if there had been anything to cheer, Lucy would surely have held it out to him. It appeared to him that an age had passed since he left Dover ; the thread of those golden days had been sharply, even rudely snapped, and nothing whatever connected this life with that.

It has been said that he was walking along lanes. The lanes were narrow and in parts stony, but the stones were generally used for

mending in patches, and it was possible to pick your way along softer places. Here and there on either side of the road stood a white cottage, or it might be a larger group of white cottages than could be judged by first sight, a house being apparently pierced to give access to a little picturesque stone-paved court, into which two or three dwellings opened, and which ended in a delightfully-coloured, much-worn flight of stone steps, leading up to garden or orchard. These orchards, which were, indeed, a great feature in the village, and in early spring turned it into a lovely bower of blossom, were chiefly of plum-trees, and at this time plums were hanging round every house, and dropping at the feet of the passers-by. Lawrence walked past trees and houses until he reached a thicker group of cottages, and turning slightly to the left found himself on the crest of a hill, and at the head of the principal street of this end of the scattered

village, which immediately ran sharply down to its chief highway—the river.

What a street it was, and how full of pictures! The road steep, and curving a little from side to side, out of pure mercy to man or beast who tried their breath against it; with no hard edges, but softly fringed with kindly bordering of grass and groundsel and shepherd's purse—the walls of the gardens by its side, rich with all the dainty and delicate colours grey stone can take under the mellowing of sun and wind, and growth of tiny weeds; broken by gay little gates with steps leading up to them on one side the road, and steps leading down from them on the other; or may be, a hospitable absence of gate at all, and the little path lying open to all comers—the gardens, one tangle of flowers, great fuchsias, carnations, phloxes, roses, flowering their very hearts out for joy of the sunshine and soft moisture—the cottages, plastered and

thatched, set some back, some forward, at all sorts of angles to meet the steepness of the hill, or the brokenness of the ground, with shelter of homely little porches, just a few boards nailed on to keep the drip off the door, with square small-paned windows, behind which geraniums flamed ; with, over all, the soft gloom of the thatched roofs, such as only the west country can show for velvety smoothness and rich tone. In the street two artists were sitting, painting ; two or three fishermen climbed the hill, carrying their oars ; children swarmed about, picking up the purple plums which had fallen from overhanging trees ; an old horse stood at a gate, half-way up the hill ; and down below, where the houses ended, the river, golden in the evening lights, flowed swiftly by on its way to the sea.

Lawrence went leisurely down the hill, slipping here and there over a loose stone,

and exchanging greetings with the people, who had known him ever since he was a boy. One old woman stopped him to ask how his mother felt herself that day, and another insisted upon showing him the crutch which Major Macarthy had made for her little grandson. At the foot of the hill, on the one side, the houses turned sharply round, and ran along, two or three of them, confronting the river. There was a little stone jetty for use when the tide was low, and a dozen boats floating near it. At high tide steps in the wall formed the landing-place.

Lawrence liked this part of the village, the broad sweep of the curving river, with wooded banks opposite, the cheerfulness of the clustering boats, some of which were generally in movement, the old ferryman in his blue jersey, and the people who came dawdling down to their amphibious occupations. He took a turn or two on the

edge of the river wall, his thoughts running persistently in one track, and now and then, by shutting his eyes, he could almost imagine that Norma was walking there by his side.

Then he found by a thickening of the hangers-on that the steamer was expected, and presently she came in sight, whistled, paused for a few seconds opposite the village, dropped a woman or two and a great many empty baskets into the ferry-boat, churned up the water again and went her way up the river towards the golden lights.

‘There’s Polly!’ said a large red-faced girl, with broad shoulders and a loud voice.

‘And she’ve sold her plums down to River-mouth.’

‘Ees, if her ain’t chucked ’em overboard to save bringing of ’em back,’ suggested a sandy-haired young fisherman, with a grin. The first girl turned upon him sharply.

‘I’ll be bound, any way, her’s a better hand

to a bargain than you, Tom Taylor. Who parted with his veesh for eightinpence a poun', and seed 'em sell it under his nose for dree an' six?'

She emphasized her remark by pointing scornfully, and there was a burst of laughter which made the luckless Tom look wrathfully around him, with desire to punch some one's head. But the girl, who was the champion rower of the river, turned her back upon him, and swinging herself easily upon the wall, watched the slow steady strokes of the old ferryman.

His passengers were a stout woman, and a small sickly-looking girl. This last was Polly, and the big girl welcomed her with a good-humoured nod, and was greeted by her as Ida. There was a good deal of laughter, which seemed principally directed against the sandy-haired young fisherman, and Lawrence with some amusement saw them turn into a

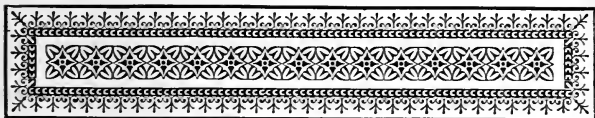
small cottage hard by, where the ferryman lived, and against which the sailings of the steamers were posted up. But presently the younger girl came out again with two or three letters for the rectory, which had reached Rivermouth by the second post. Letters were apt to come out in a skirmishing fashion, by any means which happened to present itself, over and above the usual delivery, but Lawrence had forgotten this when he watched the steamer arrive.

Now, with some excitement, he saw Lucy's handwriting.

He tore it open at once, and read it eagerly, searching, as he read, for one word of Norma. There was a word, but it was very barren; nothing could be extracted from it beyond a cold fact, and in spite of having wished for it so strongly he could now have found it in his heart to desire that it had not come, but that the news of Lucy's arrival was


pleasant to him. He thrust the letter into his pocket and stood with his hands behind him, looking at the water, which was beginning to lap the stones beneath his feet. He had to allow that the silence of Lucy's letter was distinctly unfavourable, for it had been a very small thing he had set his mind upon, and could not have compromised Norma. But the darker things looked, the more there sprang up within him an obstinate spirit which would not accept defeat; and he told himself that he would extract comfort from Lucy. Then he drew out her letter and re-read it, with more thought of her and less of Norma, and found that she was to be at King's Ferry the very next day, and asked him to come and see her on Sunday afternoon.





CHAPTER XIV.

Little hands clapping, and little tongues clattering
And, like fowls in the farm yard, when barley is scattering,
Out came the children running.—R. BROWNING.

‘ET out of the way, Lionel; I want
to see!’

‘Then you can’t!’

‘But I will! Mother, Lionel’s *so* unfair!
He keeps the Illustrated all to himself, and it
wasn’t brought for *him*.’

‘Nor for you either, Miss Tell-tale-tit. I
wouldn’t be such a cry-baby if I were you.
Oh, I say, here’s no end of a lark! Look at
those blackies scuttling off, with these other
fellows after them!’

‘Where? Oh, Lionel, do let me see!’

‘There! We’ll play at that up and down the stairs. You and the Duffer and Peg can black your faces, and I’ll give you six stairs start. If you’re caught, you’ll have to pay, mind that!’

‘No, I shan’t. I shall be a white man.’

‘No, you won’t, Pat. I never saw such a disobliging girl as you are; you always want to be what I am.’

‘Because you always take the best before I’ve time to choose.’

‘Well, I won’t play.’

‘Then, don’t.’

Matters, however, were as usual compromised, and Lucy in her room, dressing for dinner, became aware of violent and extraordinary sounds on the landing, every now and then culminating in a violent bang against her door. Martin, who was always very quiet and respectful, remarked that

the servants had already told her that the children were very masterful, more particularly Master Lionel, and that Mrs. Russell found it difficult to manage him, though she could not make up her mind to send him to a regular school, and he and his sister, Miss Patricia, went every day to some lady in Rivermouth.

‘Patricia!—What a name!’ said Lucy, with a little frown, feeling that a small house full of noisy children was more than she had bargained for. ‘Thank you, Martin; you may go. I suppose there will be a bell or something, but if not, you must come and tell me when dinner is ready.’

She stood at the window for some time after this, looking out, even her mind—which was not receptive of impressions of natural beauty, though she could discourse learnedly upon joyous schemes of colour, and bits of drapery, and artistic arrangements—touched

by a dim sense of wonder at the fairness of what lay before her. The house was built so as to look across and up the river, which here was hurrying down to the sea, laden with messages from the lonely moor, from wooded hills, and trees bending down to kiss it as it passed, but never able to woo it to pause one minute in its swift rush. Now the fret and impatience of earlier days are over, it has widened into an almost land-locked harbour—steep hills shutting out the whirl of the wind, and a bend at the river's mouth sheltering it from fiercer rage of seas outside—where peacefully rocking on the waters lie craft of all kind, small and great, old dismantled black hulks, made over to the service of King Coal, delicately-lined yachts, foreign brigs, and every variety of little boat, among them tiny steam-launches darting backwards and forwards. Opposite, curled at the foot of the steep hill, so steep that one wonders

how plough can be found to turn the rich red earth, lies the old town, its frontage of weather-beaten, water-washed houses, black and grey, with here and there a bit of red roof, and green stains of sea-weed on the deep sloping walls, with long ladders let down them, as the only means of getting from the doorways to the boats clustered beneath. The church tower lies a little back, and on this August evening there creeps round it a soft haze of smoke from the houses. Beyond this are purple mists, and against it rise sharply the masts of the ships in the harbour.

Lucy's eyes, having taken this in with a certain sense of satisfaction, began to smile as they travelled up the river, and she reflected that Marlham and George Lawrence were certainly not far away. She did not doubt that she would see him next day, and she hastily ran over some of the things she intended to say, and imagined his answers.

This is often an interesting exercise, and it occupied her until she became aware of a struggle and loud breathing outside her door, together with the fitful sound of a bell, which appeared to be grasped and gagged whenever it began to tinkle. Suspecting this to mean dinner, she opened the door, and found Lionel, Patricia, and another little girl engaged in speechless combat over the dinner-bell, which, in the momentary lull produced by her appearance, Lionel triumphantly seized, and rang with both hands until she was almost deafened.

She put both hands to her ears, half laughing.

‘Oh, you dreadful children, stop, stop! Do you suppose I am deaf?’

‘Mother told *me* to do it,’ said Patricia in an injured tone.

Lionel did not trouble himself to retaliate, he merely continued to ring the bell as vio-

lently as he could over his head, eyed enviously by his sisters.

‘Why do you put on another frock?’ demanded Peg, holding Lucy’s hand, and swinging downstairs. ‘Mother doesn’t.’

‘Much you know!’ said Pat contemptuously. ‘Mother *does*, when there’s anybody here she cares about. She’s put one on to-day,’ she explained to Lucy, ‘because it’s your first night. I don’t suppose she will to-morrow.’

Here they reached the drawing-room, into which Lionel precipitated himself, still ringing his bell.

‘Lionel, Lionel,’ cried his mother, rushing upon him distractedly, ‘what are you thinking of? Put down that horrid thing! Patricia, take it away; I told you that *you* were to ring the dinner-bell, and it does seem hard that you will not do what you are told. Lucy, I hope you will not mind these dreadful

children. I hope they will behave better with you than, I am sorry to say, is generally the case. They make me quite ashamed of them.'

'The Duffer has just broken a pane of glass,' remarked Lionel unconcernedly.

'Yes, mother, he put his head straight through,' said Patricia in confirmation.

'Is he much cut?' demanded Mrs. Russell anxiously.

'Oh, he's howling,' returned Lionel, 'of course! Mary's plastering it up. I don't suppose it's worse than usual. Get out of that, Peg!'

Mrs. Russell was a disjointed, anxious-looking woman, who, standing much in awe of her husband, when he died had remitted the laws of discipline which guided the household so effectually, that she had never been able to get them together again. Lucy, it must be owned, remembered little about her; there had been a long gap in their intercourse

before the effusive letter which had produced this visit. She congratulated herself, as she looked round her, that she had not fallen into Norma's suggestion of leaving Martin behind. The dinner was not very successful, and was broken in upon by raids of the irrepressible Lionel. But after the last of these had been effectively satisfied, there was a little time of peace, which Lucy utilised.

‘I think your view is quite lovely, Lena,’ she said emphatically. ‘I have always heard a great deal about the beauty of this place, and I am looking forward immensely to seeing the neighbourhood.’

‘Yes, it *is* pretty,’ said Mrs. Russell, with that air of modest depreciation which dwellers in good scenery put on, as if the beauty were a personal attribute. ‘But, my dear, it is very far away, and I am terribly afraid that you will find it very dull.’

‘Oh, no, I am never dull,’ returned Lucy.

Besides, I dare say I shall discover that you have delightful neighbours. I have a theory that nice people live in nice places.'

'I don't know, I am sure,' said Mrs. Russell vaguely. 'I never thought of it in that light. And the children occupy me so much——'

'Ah, the children—I mean to make you take a little holiday from the children,' said Lucy lightly. 'They and I shall fall out if they exact too much from you.'

'Poor little Alan is always breaking something,' pursued Mrs. Russell, without taking much notice of these remarks. 'It seems as if he could not help it, but you don't know how inconvenient it is at times. I never feel quite safe.'

'By the way,' said Lucy, 'we met a gentleman this year who must live somewhere about here. I wonder if you know the name—Lawrence?'

‘Of course,’ said Mrs. Russell, with much interest. ‘Of course! It must be Mr. George Lawrence. His father is the rector of Marlham, a village on the other side of the river.’

‘Oh, then, he will never come across,’ said the girl with a laugh.

‘You forget the ferry. We are not so cut off from each other as all that. Why, Lionel and Patricia go every day to Mrs. Adams in Rivermouth. She is a perfect treasure of a teacher.’

‘Well,’ said Lucy, ‘if the Lawrences don’t really live a hundred miles away, I dare say he will soon come and look me up, for he knows I’m in the neighbourhood.’

‘Yes; or if he does not come, we might arrange something—we might go to Marlham by the steamer, and call on Mrs. Lawrence. Lionel always likes so much to go on the river, and we might choose a half-holiday. I know he and Patricia will both want to

come—Major Macarthy makes so much of them.'

'Who is Major Macarthy?'

'Oh, the nicest man in the world! He is Mr. Lawrence's brother-in-law, and I suppose he is dreadfully extravagant and reckless, but then his good-nature is quite wonderful. The children adore him; I am always quite happy when Lionel is with him. I know he is safe.'

'Oh,' said Lucy, considering; 'that is Major Macarthy?'

'Yes. He lives on at the rectory; I don't know that he has any settled home, and people do say that Mrs. Lawrence dislikes his being there so constantly, but then people will always say anything, and I am sure he must be a delightful person to have in the house.'

'And Miss Lawrence? What is Miss Lawrence like?'

'Oh, she is rather a handsome girl, but

not very sociable. The children don't care about her.'

Lucy gathered together as many facts and theories about the Lawrence family as Mrs. Russell had to bestow, taking more precautions in the gathering than were at all necessary, since her friend was the most unsuspecting woman in the world, and when Lucy excused herself from going to a children's service at Rivermouth on the next afternoon, had no other thought than that it was a pity she should lose the chance of hearing Lionel distinguish himself by one of his brilliant answers, which it must be owned had been known to embarrass the clergyman.

When they had gone Lucy opened the window wider than it was in the habit of being opened, placed the two most comfortable chairs in the room at a good conversational angle, provided herself with a book, and sat down in one of the chairs. She was

anxious that Lawrence should come, anxious to note his face and manner when he saw her, but her heart did not quicken its beats by one throb when she heard a ring, and then immediately his voice in the hall.

His greeting quite satisfied her, for it was unmistakably full of pleasure.

‘Your letter was a complete surprise,’ he said eagerly. ‘I had not reckoned upon such welcome news, and when I heard nothing from you I felt as if a great gap had opened between the past month and this time.’

‘Isn’t it wonderful?’ smiled Lucy, who was looking her prettiest in a white dress of a soft clinging material. George had left his sister at home in a blue serge. ‘Isn’t it wonderful? When we said good-bye, not much more than a fortnight ago, how amazed I should have been if any one had told me that I should have been sitting here, talking to you, to-day!’

‘It is magic, I think,’ he said. ‘But tell me, how was Dover when you left it, and how was Mrs. Winyeatt?’

‘Dover was very well, and so was Norma, but Norma struck me as the busiest of the two. She *is* very busy, you know.’

He was looking at her earnestly, and his eyes asked whether she had no fuller word for him than this. She kept her own smiling face unchanged.

‘You must give me more particulars,’ he said at last in a quiet voice.

‘Oh, of course, about poor Janet’s arm. I am always forgetting that you don’t know everything. Well, Janet is radiantly happy, engaged to Mr. Rose, without, so far as I can see, the faintest prospect of their ever marrying. That doesn’t seem to trouble them in the least, and Norma is at present acting as their guardian angel. Norma kept her at Calais for a fortnight.’ She paused. Then, as

he was silent, she half closed her eyes, as if considering. 'I think that's all,' she said.

'Mrs. Winyeatt did not honour me with any word of remembrance, I suppose?' he asked, at the end of a minute.

'I am sure she would have wished me to say all that was kind,' exclaimed Lucy eagerly. 'She always thought of you with the greatest regard, as dear Paul's friend. But, you know, she has a great many calls upon her, and it is really difficult for her to remember everything, poor dear, particularly when she first comes home. I shall tell her that I have seen you. And, perhaps,' she added shyly, 'perhaps I may make acquaintance with your mother and sister?'

'Nelly will drive in to-morrow,' said Lawrence, recovering himself with an effort. 'My mother, I am sorry to say, does not leave the house and garden, but I hope you will come and see her.'

‘Mrs. Russell talked of some delightful expedition, which sounded as if you lived in an idyllic village.’

‘I don’t know about idyllic; idylls have a way of turning into prose upon close acquaintance. But it is a picturesque place,’ he said more cheerfully, ‘and I hope you will know it well before long, though I can’t expect to make your stay as pleasant as you made mine.’

‘Please don’t say that,’ said Lucy, with a little conscious laugh.

He lingered, she was sure that he lingered, for some time beyond that of the ordinary visit, and her own image filled so large a part in her thoughts, that she really failed to perceive that he was waiting and hungering for a word of Norma. But it was quite true that he was glad—very glad—to see Lucy. She was not only closely connected with the woman whom in his heart he held so

dear, but the experiences of his own home, its roughnesses, its wrangling affections—perhaps, although he was not a vain man, a chilly sense that he was held there in but small estimation—all these influences inclined him to turn back to those friends with whom life had been so different, and enjoy again the pleasant warmth of their society. And even if he went away with disappointment dogging his steps, he would not give up the hope that when they met again, some crumb, some word of comfort might fall to his share.

Mrs. Russell was much excited on her return to hear that Mr. Lawrence had been.

‘How soon for him to come, and how fortunate, how very fortunate that you were at home, though I was really wishing you could have been there to have heard Lionel. He is the most original boy, and I was not at all surprised to see Mr. Trevor smile. I assure you, I smiled myself. Still, it would have

been a pity if you had missed Mr. Lawrence. Did he say anything about his sister ?'

'I think he did talk about her coming in to-morrow.'

'Oh, then I am sure he must have insisted very strongly, for she is a dreadful person about paying visits, and it is months since she has been here. Oh, what a crash ! Poor Alan must have broken another lamp, and it generally happens on a Sunday !'

Mrs. Russell ran out of the room, looking in again presently to console Lucy with the information that Alan was not much hurt, and hoping she did not mind the smell of oil, which by this time, indeed, pervaded the house.

But Lucy was in good spirits, and not likely to succumb to minor disagreeables—though always keenly conscious of them. She employed the rest of the day in going to evening Service, and in writing a letter to Norma

full of delight at her surroundings. She wrote cleverly, and touched off Mrs. Russell and her children with a few happy words of description, which yet were not ill-natured. She said she had had a most pleasant visit from Mr. Lawrence ; he was looking exceedingly well ; he was going to bring his sister to call upon her the next day, and they were to make an expedition to Marlham as soon as possible. She was sure it was not going to be at all dull, and that she should enjoy herself very much, so she intended to stay for some time. And so on, and so on, but all in the same strain.

Norma read the letter at breakfast, and passed it silently to Miss Ellison.

‘Very ‘satisfactory,’ said Miss Ellison, when she had folded and returned it. ‘Lucy is a delightful correspondent, she always puts her points quite clearly. Still, I don’t know that she always puts *my* points. I used to like

Mr. Lawrence; I should have been glad to have heard how many nice things he said about us.'

'I thought he would have sent his love to *me*,' said Agnes in an injured tone.

'Oh, so he did, Agnes; of course he sent it. Don't you be disturbed. Aunt Lucy is sometimes very absent-minded.'

Nelly Lawrence was not at all well pleased at being required to go with her brother to call upon Miss Winyeatt. At first, indeed, she flatly refused; she never did pay calls, she thought the whole system humbugging; she was always bored to death by Mrs. Russell and her spoilt children, and she had settled to go out fishing with Uncle Tim. Somewhat to her surprise, her brother quietly put all these excuses on one side, and she found herself obliged to yield. On another point she met with another surprise, for when the cart came round, he was driving.

‘Oh, hand over the reins, George,’ she said hastily.

‘Not to day, Nell.’

‘But why not? I always drive.’

‘Well,’ he said good-humouredly, ‘to tell you the truth, it makes me feel rather a fool. And as we are going into Rivermouth, I’m the more sensitive.’

She lifted her eyebrows.

‘I don’t see that you need mind when Uncle Tim doesn’t. And I can tell you, that mare requires handling.’

He did not answer her, probably because he was engaged in tucking the rug round his knees. She glanced at him discontentedly, though, with an odd new feeling of something like respect, and thought he looked very square and solid, and up to work. As they went along, she had to own that he could drive. It would have surprised her if she had known that the mare was really her

brother's property ; he had bought it from his father, but asked that the change of owners should not be talked about.

‘Nelly's feelings would hardly get over it,’ he said with a laugh, though he knew that it was the rector himself who chiefly suffered from this evidence of fallen fortunes.

‘George,’ said the girl, after an interval of silence.

‘Yes.’

‘My mother's been telling me. I don't mean to take that hundred a year.’

‘I hope you'll think better of it.’

‘No. I should hate it. I should hate the obligation.’

‘You needn't look upon it in that light. To tell you the truth, it seemed the best way of indirectly helping my father and mother. You know, or you ought to know, that there's a lot of money gone—gone altogether, unless I'm very much mistaken—and the question is

how to tide them over the difficulty. They will accept for you what it would be bitter for them to accept for themselves.'

'It's as bitter for me,' interrupted the girl.

'I think not, if you consider the matter. If you had any money you would insist upon helping them. I thought it all over, and couldn't see any better way. Now, you see, you can pay my mother a fixed sum towards the housekeeping, and it will be the greatest possible comfort to her. I hope you won't deprive me of that satisfaction.'

She was silent, then—'I shall hate it!' she repeated strongly.

'Can you suggest another plan?'

There was another silence; Nelly sat upright, staring at the splashboard for some time, before she burst out defiantly—

'I shall give some to Uncle Tim.'

'It rests with yourself what you will do

with it,' said Lawrence gravely. 'I have never dreamed of dictating to you how it should be spent. If you like to give, and Tim likes to accept—well and good!'

She looked quickly at him.

'Of course he will accept it,' she said. 'Why, don't you know that he would share his last sixpence with any of us, and he certainly would not object to sharing mine.'

'But you won't take me into any engagement of the sort,' he said with a laugh.

'Ah, you're different; I don't know you so well. Look out! Oh, I say, you did that neatly!'

'She's a fast beast, but I don't think my father ought to drive her; she's too nervous, and he has a very heavy hand,' said George.

Neither by thanks nor remonstrance did the girl again allude to the hundred pounds, and it might be taken for granted that her brother had gained his point. But if he had

known it, it was an unlucky triumph to have achieved just before the visit to Lucy, for Nelly had such an immoderate dread of loss of independence, that its immediate consequence was to make her more brusque than ever. Perhaps at no other time would the contrast between the two girls have been so strongly marked ; Lucy, with her pretty manners, her delicate complexion, her perfectly fitting dress ; and Nelly, severe in blue serge, rigid with determination that no hundred or thousand pounds a year should bribe her into saying, or doing, or leaving unsaid and undone anything which would have been otherwise before. It was a struggle, or so she felt it, for absolute life, though George would have been amazed had he known what she was experiencing. He had no thought whatever of his own generosity, which indeed was to him a very simple matter, but he was vexed that his sister should respond so in-

differently to Lucy's advances, and it almost forced him into a larger warmth of friendliness. Still, there was a certain constraint about the visit; Mrs. Russell was anxiously desirous that all should go well, but her attention had many demands made upon it by her youngest son, whose head seemed always inconveniently in the way, and to act as a machine specially formed for destruction.

Something was said about their going to Marlham.

'Will you drive or come by water?' asked Lawrence, leaning forward to speak to Lucy.

'By water, certainly. Isn't that the thing here? To go by land would be as bad as travelling along the Rhine in the train.'

'Very well, that is decided. And on what day?'

'Any day—oh, no,' replied Lucy, smiling at Mrs. Russell; 'it is to be a half-holiday, isn't it, Lena? and I suppose half-holidays are as

they used to be, on Wednesdays and Saturdays? Would Saturday do?'

'Why not Wednesday?'

'Well, Wednesday, then. But Lena and Miss Lawrence must decide.'

'Nelly, you know about the tides. Is there a steamer in the early afternoon?'

Nelly, thus adjured, gave her information rigidly. Lucy looked at her, and then bent forward to say in a low voice:

'I believe you rather dread such an invasion. Will it be too much for Mrs. Lawrence?'

The girl reddened.

'For my mother? Oh no, she is always glad to see people. She is not absolutely an invalid; she would wish you to come.'

'I think she begged my sister to say so,' said Lawrence, with a touch of anger in his voice. Perhaps they all felt it a relief when the Duffer, as his brother and sisters

called him, at this moment fell headlong, with his head in the waste-paper basket, howled vigorously, and was removed from the room kicking.

‘I hope that Wednesday will not bring us *all*,’ whispered Lucy, with a mischievous smile at Lawrence as they shook hands.

He was annoyed with his sister, and they did not say much to each other as they went down the hill, called a boat and crossed to the other side, where the dog-cart was put up. But Lawrence was not the man to let anything ‘rankle, and as they drove up a steep hill he said—

‘I wish you had been more cordial in your manner to Miss Winyeatt.’

‘I didn’t like her,’ returned Nelly serenely.

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know’—indifferently. ‘Mutual repulsion, I dare say.’

‘At any rate, she did not show hers.’

‘No, that sort of girl never does show anything honestly.’

He began to laugh.

‘Don’t you think, on the whole, that society gains by a certain reticence? It would take a bold man to venture into a circle of people who marked their disapproval as plainly as you marked it to-day. Seriously, Nell, I shall be glad if you can reconcile it with your conscience to be pleasant to Miss Winyeatt.’

‘I can’t pretend,’ she said; ‘it’s all a sham.’

‘Not at all.’

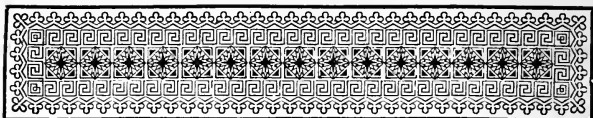
‘But it is; it must be, when you want me to profess to be different from what I am.’

‘Who talked about professing? I was suggesting that you might *be* different,’ returned Lawrence in a matter-of-fact tone.

Nelly looked at him, and then broke into a laugh.

‘Oh, George,’ she said appreciatively, ‘you scored that very neatly! I must tell Uncle Tim.’





CHAPTER XV.

Where the soil is rich and ruddy, though perhaps a trifle
muddy

Where the earliest and latest of our flow'rets may be seen,
There, sequestered from the surly sea-winds' angry hurly-burly,
Lies the house, apart and sheltered, set in frame of pastures
green.



THEY were about a mile from the
rectory when they saw a figure be-
fore them, going in the same direc-
tion. Nelly immediately became excited.

‘That’s Uncle Tim ! Make haste, George,
and overtake him.’

On nearer approach she gave a peculiar
cry, upon which the figure stopped. It was
then evident that he was carrying a dog under
his arm.

‘What have you got there?’ asked Lawrence, pulling up.

‘Oh, it’s hurt!’ cried Nelly, precipitating herself on the ground.

‘I’ll put him in with you, if you don’t mind,’ said Major Macarthy cheerfully. ‘I suspect the poor brute belonged to some caravan or other, and got run over, and left behind. I picked him up in the road, and I dare say we can soon doctor him up. Lie still, you poor little misery; nobody’s going to torment you,’ he added, settling the frightened animal with a touch as gentle as a woman’s.

‘You haven’t improved your coat!’ said Nelly reproachfully.

‘Don’t say so, or I shall be ruined entirely! But never mind, we’ll sponge it when we get home. Up with you, Nelly, and I’ll take a lift behind, if George has no objection. Where have you been, Nell?’

‘To pay an odious visit to Mrs. Russell, at

King's Ferry. I do hate visits, with every one sitting like pokers.'

'Was I a poker?' put in Lawrence, with a laugh.

'Of course,' said Nelly staring. 'That's what one always feels like.'

It is a curious fact, which may be remarked in passing, that the persons who paralyse others by their stiffness are those who complain most loudly of the formality of society.

'The return visit is to come off on Wednesday,' said George.

'And those dreadful children are coming.'

'Oh, but that's a fine little boy,' pleaded the major. 'He's really very intelligent, and I'll take him down to the Creek, and he'll be quite happy. How's the dog getting on, and what shall we call him, Nell?'

'Then you mean to keep him? He isn't much to look at,' Lawrence said.

'He's as ugly a little brute as I ever saw ;

no one will cry out to have him,' returned the other, laughing. 'Oh yes, we shall have to keep him, shan't we, Nell? and to find him a name. I've tried all I could think of, but I've never hit on the right one.'

When they reached the rectory, he took as much trouble about the animal as if it had been his own for years, not leaving him until his hurts had been thoroughly bathed, and he, lying snugly coiled up in a basket in a corner of the stable. He was an ugly little white terrier, very humble and grateful, and apparently scarcely able to believe in the reality of this turn of Fortune's wheel, which took him out of kicks and starvation to land him in a home of bones and kind words.

'Toby—that will be as good a name as any,' Nelly said; and no one proposing anything more suggestive, Toby he remained.

When the steamer appeared, George Lawrence and Major Macarthy were on the land-

ing-place to welcome their guests, and the major had even proposed that to do it the more royally they should go out in the ferry-boat. But this Lawrence negatived.

‘One needn’t go to one’s extremest limits,’ he said protestingly ; ‘the ferry-boat would be the last step of attention ; it would be impossible to do more if——’

‘If you were engaged,’ said the major with brisk interest. Lawrence looked at him in amazement. ‘I don’t mean that you are,’ added the other hurriedly.

‘I? To Miss Winyeatt? No, indeed, Tim.’

‘I wonder, though, that you haven’t brought home a wife. You’re a very good fellow, and would have no difficulty in finding some one ; and if your income was not quite sufficient, I could put you in the way of doubling it. I could indeed, my dear fellow. Only this morning——’

But the boat was in, and the next moment the major was helping with all his might to pull her close to the stones, quite indifferent to the fact that he was himself standing in two or three inches of water. Lionel's first feat was to seize the boat and rock it with violence as his mother and Lucy were getting out; he was grasped by Lawrence, but slipped away like an eel, and attached himself boisterously to Major Macarthy.

‘Never mind,’ said Lucy, recovering her balance cleverly. ‘Oh, is this a real village, or is it only a play place?’

‘The hill is real enough, and so is the mud. Has Mrs. Russell prepared you for all the hardships you are called upon to encounter when you come and take pity upon rural acquaintances?’

‘She did not half tell me how delightful it was. Lena!—no, never mind, she will trot along quite comfortably with Major Macarthy

and those dreadful children. I assure you I did my best to spare you that infliction, but it was impossible. The house revolves round their fancies. Oh, what a charming hill!—what fascinating cottages climbing up and up! Mr. Lawrence, we had nothing like this at Dover.'

He said, in a much graver tone than she had used, 'Hadh't you? I shall always think very kindly of Dover.'

'Shall you? I'm very glad,' she said, flashing a smiling look at him. 'Norma and I both thought you were so very good and patient to put up as you did with our little amusements.'

'Norma and I!' He could not think of anything else. 'Have you heard from Mrs. Winyeatt since I saw you?' he said at last.

'No. She is too busy a person to be a good correspondent.' Lucy stopped to smell a rose which hung over a stone wall. 'Mr.

Lawrence, it is no use denying it, you *are* idyllic ! Why wasn't I born to live in a village like this ?'

'You might find it circumscribed,' said Lawrence briefly.

But she would not be put off by any dispraise. She talked to the children, and the old women, and by the time they reached the top of the hill she had quite a gay little nosegay stuck into her belt, of the flowers she had most admired.

'A pleasant-spoken young lady,' said Mrs. Evans, stepping out into the road to look after her.

'Who be her ?'

'Dun' know. Somebuddy Master George be taken up with—I'll be boun'. See how her looks up to un, like a blackbird to a cherry.'

'Well, now,' said an old woman in a sprigged lilac sunbonnet, 'if 'twere me, I'd soonder

marry the major. He's older, for certain, but what's that? He's a fine man an' free and open-handed, an' I've a said many a time, an' I'll say it again, his wife weed be a lucky woman. Why, theer, my old man, afore he died, he wor always a tellin' about the major. "He does me more good than the passon," he said, "more good than the passon." You mind, Eliza Anne, don't 'ee? Them was his very words, and he up with his stick as he said 'em.'

Mrs. Lawrence was in the drawing-room to receive her visitors. It was not such a pleasant room as the study, which, in spite of shabby leathers, had a homely and comfortable air, whereas the drawing-room looked bare and forbidding. At least, this was what Lawrence felt; he had a curiously perturbed sensation in bringing in Lucy to his mother, as if Norma had something to do with the introduction, and his manner was just sufficiently stirred to add a conviction to Mrs. Law-

rence's suspicions, which had been roused by Nelly. This gave her own a touch of nervous anxiety, and she looked very searchingly into Lucy's face. The girl was too much taken up with thoughts of herself to be sensitive to this little vibration of feeling between the two others, but she was prepared to be pleased, and liked Mrs. Lawrence's welcome. She was prettier than the mother had expected, for George Lawrence had not spoken of her appearance, and Nelly merely remarked that she was not bad-looking. But Mrs. Lawrence was immediately aware that if her features did not produce that effect of absolute beauty which sometimes seems to depend on no more than a hair's-breadth, her light hair, and the beauty of her complexion, freshened, but not reddened, by the walk, were quite sufficiently attractive to give substance to all that had been floating through the elder woman's mind.

‘It was very good of you to come,’ she

said. 'It is good of any one to face our terrible hill, which I remember very well, though I have not seen it for a long time. It is a great bar between us and the world.'

'It is delightfully original!' said Lucy brightly, 'and at last I feel that I have been shown a real Devonshire village. Part of one, that is, for Mr. Lawrence has promised to introduce me presently to a great deal more.'

Lawrence at this moment was talking to Mrs. Russell, and his mother drew her chair a little nearer to the girl.

'I am very pleased to see you,' she said earnestly, 'because George has spoken more than once of his stay at Dover, and of his friends there, and I am always glad when he finds pleasure in his own country. He is terribly given to love of roving, which is a great snare to a young man.'

'Ah, I dare say it is,' returned Lucy in a sympathetic manner, not because she thought

so, but because she disliked disagreeing with any one. 'But now that you have him, you will not let him run away very soon.'

'You must not think we wish to tie him down here. I know that is not to be desired. Only I begrudge all that time spent in travelling, which seems to do no good to any one.'

'When next he shows signs of breaking away, you must let us know, and we will entrap him at Dover,' Lucy answered gaily.

'Had you met George before?'

'My sister-in-law, Mrs. Winyeatt, is an old friend, you know. He was with them in Rome when her husband died.'

The mother did not know, but did not say so; she was always a little jealous of others being better acquainted with the doings of those she loved than she was herself. At this point the rector came in and sat down by Lucy.

‘I thought I heard the children,’ he said, looking round.

‘Yes, poor little things, I brought them,’ put in Mrs. Russell; ‘and that kind Major Macarthy has taken them off to the Creek.’

Mrs. Lawrence could not resist a foreboding—‘I hope he will not let them tumble in.’

‘Pooh, pooh!’ said the rector. ‘Tim is as safe as an old nurse. Don’t you be frightened, Mrs. Russell; don’t you be frightened.’

‘No, indeed,’ said Mrs. Russell, recovering herself obediently. ‘I always feel quite at ease with Major Macarthy.’

Mrs. Lawrence shrugged her shoulders, but her son came over to Lucy.

‘If you cared to begin the great work of exploring now,’ he said, ‘we might satisfy Mrs. Russell, and come back to tea in the garden. That’s what you propose, mother, isn’t it?’

There was nothing which Lucy would not

have found agreeable; she was quite aware that Mrs. Lawrence looked at her with interest, and since the most ingenious vanity could hardly have supposed that interest to proceed from anything purely personal, she was able to argue with truth that it originated in the mother's anxiety to learn something of the girl for whom her son cared.

So the four set forth with the purpose of showing Miss Winyeatt more thatched cottages, and flowers, and distant views of the winding river and the far-off moor: and Mrs. Lawrence, resting her chin in the palm of her hand, and supporting her elbow by the other hand, walked thoughtfully up and down the room. She had not forgotten her son's acknowledgment that there was a woman whom he desired to make his wife, and who—she had gathered—did not return his feelings; and she did not dream of supposing Lucy to be that woman, because it appeared to her

very evident that the girl liked him, and had come into the neighbourhood for the very purpose of being near him. But, though she lived out of the world, she had gathered enough from books, or from that instinct of women which is, probably, hereditary, to know that hearts are very often caught on the rebound. She put down George's present frame of feeling—which, it will be seen, she took for granted on but slender evidence—as springing out of this law of nature, and having quickly satisfied herself as to the thing itself, and the steps which led up to it, she spent a good deal more time upon the question of Lucy's worthiness. It would have been impossible to have satisfied her wholly, but that is not an unusual drawback with mothers of only sons, and she confessed that the girl was pretty-looking, and had pleasant manners. Nor was there any touch of sordid meanness in her wish that she might

bring with her a fortune, for since George's generosity to his father, she had earnestly desired that he might in some way be compensated, and the only way which ever presented itself to her mind was for him to marry. Here was a girl, pretty, attractive, sensible—if only to these qualities she added a moderate fortune, Mrs. Lawrence felt that she should be thankfully taken to their hearts.

When they all came back, tea was spread upon the lawn, with a little more nicety and finish than was common at the rectory. The party had visited the stables on their way back, and brought with them Toby, now sufficiently recovered to endure a little rough petting from the children. Mrs. Russell was more impressed than ever with the delightfulness of Major Macarthy, and the promptitude with which he had rescued Lionel from various dangers; she poured out her ad-

miration with effusion to Mrs. Lawrence, who listened coldly.

‘Yes,’ she said at last, ‘he is very much of a boy himself. Tell me, have you known Miss Winyeatt long?’

‘Oh, for a great many years. We lost sight of each other for a good while,’ said Mrs. Russell, with a sigh which might be taken as a tribute to her marriage or to any other of her many trials, ‘and I was so pleased the other day to get the nicest letter from her! I asked her to come to me at once.’

‘And has she a father and mother?’ asked Mrs. Lawrence, not without shame at her own innocent duplicity.

‘No, indeed, poor dear! She lives with a sister-in-law. She is very well off’—Mrs. Russell sighed again—‘but it seems rather forlorn, and I should be very glad to hear she was likely to have a home of her own.’

‘Oh, there is time enough for all that,’ said Mrs. Lawrence, hastily plunging yet farther into the meshes of deceit, for in that short moment she had seen Lucy married and paying her first visit to the rectory. She exerted herself as her son had not seen her exert herself before, and was inwardly vexed by Nelly’s indifference, promising herself to take her to task for it.

But, in spite of Nelly, the little party displayed a good deal of gaiety. Lucy and the major were invincibly good-tempered; the rector, pleased with the appreciation of his parish which had just been shown, leaned comfortably back in a basket-chair, one leg thrown over the other, feeding Toby with a biscuit, and forgetful of loss of income; Lionel and Pat, for the moment, had buried the tomahawk under the influence of brown-bread scones and Devonshire cream, and George—George was perhaps the least satis-

fied of the group, but even he felt himself in a more congenial atmosphere than he had been favoured with of late, and did not fail to attribute it to Lucy.

Before they went away, Mrs. Lawrence got hold of the girl and drew her on one side.

‘My dear,’ she said, ‘do you think you could put up with old-fashioned people and such a retired place for a little while? Because, if you could, perhaps you would come and spend some time with us?’

Lucy’s eyes grew large with delight. ‘Oh, Mrs. Lawrence!’

‘There are very few inducements that we can offer,’ said the mother—hypocritically, since she had a firm conviction that the girl would find George’s presence quite sufficient inducement, ‘but it is a pretty country, and new to you; and if the weather is only fine, George and Nelly can drive you about to

some of the places worth seeing. Think it over and let me know.'

'No, I can't waste any time in thinking; and besides, I should be afraid of your changing your mind,' cried Lucy. 'Please let me say at once that I will come.'

'Very well, then, that is settled,' returned Mrs. Lawrence, well satisfied, and kissing her—an unusual action on her part; 'you have only to write and say on what day you wish your room to be ready.'

The visit had tried her a good deal, but it had pleased her more than anything that had happened of late. Her conclusions had been formed rapidly—it was not in her nature to linger long over them—and she had assured herself that not only was the marriage of her son with Lucy desirable, but that it must inevitably take place; and as she was a person of active impulses, it was a satisfaction to her to have something to do with drawing them

together. Incapacitated as she was for much which she would have gladly done, and (though she could not complain) inwardly vexed at this withdrawal being accepted by her family as a matter of course, she was the more glad when she could feel herself taking part in action once more, and she really enjoyed the amazement of her husband and daughter.

‘Asked her to stay!’ exclaimed the rector. ‘What on earth are you going to do with her, Fanny?’

‘I do think it’s the most awful bore!’ said Nelly discontentedly.

‘Besides,’ pursued the rector, with a lively sense that he now could take the whip hand of his wife, ‘I understood that economy was to be the order of the day; and it looks a little contradictory to have visitors here who will want all sorts of fiddle-faddles. Eh? However—do as you like. I’ve nothing to

say against the girl. I shall turn her over to Tim.'

'For pity's sake, Mr. Lawrence, don't thrust your brother-in-law upon her!' said his wife, putting out her hands as if to repel a disagreeable subject. Her husband suddenly looked at her with a little uneasy sadness.

'How prejudiced you women are!' he said, in an odd tone, unlike his usual rather loud assertions. 'Poor old Tim!'

'Well, we need not say anything about him,' said Mrs. Lawrence hastily. 'He is your guest, and now Miss Winyeatt will be mine.'

'Certainly,' replied the rector, turning his back and going out of the room. Mrs. Lawrence looked after him.

'Your father does not seem quite himself,' she said, almost against her will.

'Oh, it's nothing!' returned Nelly.

‘We’re both of us annoyed when you run down Uncle Tim—that’s all.’ She was following, when her mother called her back.

‘I wish you would exert yourself more when people are here,’ she said.

‘What on earth am I to do? I haven’t got any small talk.’

‘Oh, that’s nonsense! I suppose you have as much as others? Miss Winyeatt is a very nice girl, and you really must try to make her stay here pleasant. I have a particular reason for wishing it.’

‘Oh, mother, you’re an unblushing match-maker! You want her to marry George.’

‘She will be a very lucky girl if she does.’

‘That’s as people think,’ said the girl, lifting her eyebrows.

‘You ought to be the first to think it, considering how generously he has behaved to you,’ said Mrs. Lawrence warmly. ‘How

few brothers would have acted as he has acted !'

Nelly wriggled uneasily. 'I've nothing to say against George,' she burst out at last. 'I believe he's a good fellow, though I don't pretend to understand him. But as for that miserable hundred a year, if it's going to be thrown in my face, I'd sooner pitch it into the river ! I shall tell George so.'

Mrs. Lawrence took no notice of this tirade, leaving her daughter to digest her remonstrances, and determined that so far as it rested with herself, Lucy's visit should have neither difficulties nor disagreeables thrown in its way. The more she reflected on the matter, the more convinced she became that everything pointed with admirable directness to the path George should take. If his deepest love had been given elsewhere, it had not been fortunate, that much she had gathered from himself; most men had to go

through one or more of such experiences, and as she had convinced herself that he had, at any rate, a certain degree of liking for Lucy, she was certain that it might soon be nursed into something warmer, and prepared to provide the opportunities. She would have liked to have said something to her son, but—though she would not have allowed it—he was not an easy person to extract anything from, and she dared not venture far. She only said, as he lit her candle for her that night—

‘I like Miss Winyeatt, George.’

‘Ah, I thought you would. There’s something about her very pleasant,’ he agreed.

‘And I hope you approved of my asking her to stay here?’

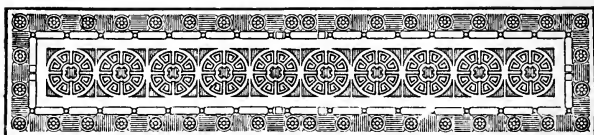
‘I’m very glad, if you and my father don’t find it a bore. She and—Mrs. Winyeatt were thoroughly hospitable when I was at Dover.’

His voice lingered for a second upon

Norma's name, but his mother was too much preoccupied with her own idea to perceive it. She repeated—

‘No, I like her ; I am sure we shall all enjoy her visit,’ and then, as he said no more, went slowly upstairs, stopping on the first landing to regain her breath.





CHAPTER XVI.

Sick children fret their mothers' hearts to shreds.

JEAN INGELow.



VISIT and invitation were duly chronicled, duly and enthusiastically, in Lucy's letter—this time to Janet Somerville. Janet was in that condition of radiant happiness which, when it falls to amiable people, causes them to long that it should be extended to all they care about. She gave the letter, with a little laugh, to Isabel when she came in, and watched her read it.

‘Well?’ she said eagerly as her sister laid it down.

‘Oh, well,’ repeated Isabel discontentedly, ‘Lucy is always lucky ! I suppose she intends to marry Mr. Lawrence, and that all those hints she gave meant something. I think she might have been very well content here.’

‘I don’t know,’ returned the experienced Janet ; ‘of course life with Mrs. Winyeatt must be perfectly charming, but you don’t know—oh, Isabel, I do so wish you were as happy as I am ! Often when I think about it, I feel so dreadfully selfish and wicked not to be able to share it with you !’

There was a gleam of tears in her eyes as she said this, so that Isabel was touched, though she made haste to repudiate the idea that Mr. Rose would have done for her.

‘You couldn’t be selfish, Janet,’ she said, giving her sister a quick kiss, ‘and don’t be a little goose and distress yourself. I’m not like you. I couldn’t have engaged myself—to Mr. Rose,’ she was going to say, but changed it

into 'for such a long waiting. I haven't the patience.'

'No—o,' said Janet doubtfully, 'I suppose not. You must meet some one very handsome, very rich—only he must be as good as Walter, or I shan't give my consent—and then you must be married at once, as I dare say Lucy will be. I said so to Mrs. Winyeatt.'

'And what did she say?' asked Isabel curiously. 'I don't know that you ought to say that sort of thing, Janet.'

'Oh, I can't help it with her! She's so dear, I'm obliged to tell her whatever is in my mind. But she didn't let me go on. She said she didn't think it fair on Lucy to discuss possibilities which she has not talked about herself.'

'Lucy would not mind our discussing them, if that were all,' said the more astute Isabel. 'I think she likes it.'

'She's nice, but she isn't to be compared

with my dear Mrs. Winyeatt!' cried Janet enthusiastically.

'Oh, if you once begin about Mrs. Winyeatt!'

'Well, Isabel, you know she's perfectly lovely. There's no one like her.'

Isabel was wandering about the room, touching this, that, and the other restlessly. She was a dark handsome girl, with a little pucker on her forehead, caused by a trick she had of frowning when she laughed.

'I know one thing,' she said presently; 'I wish we were as rich as Mrs. Winyeatt. I get fretted to death with this perpetual worrying and fussing over every penny. It is so hard on us to suffer as we do for Mervyn's extravagance. And he does not feel it half as much, for he has a periodical row, and gets it over; whereas I have the same fuss and scoldings over and over again, every week when the bills come in.'

‘Poor father! He has the worst of it, after all!’ said Janet softly.

‘Well,’ sighed the elder girl, ‘I can’t understand how, with your eyes open, you can choose the same sort of thing to go on all your life. I do hope to get out of it some day, I’m sure I should go mad if I didn’t; but you’re content to marry Walter Rose, who never can have more than twopence-halfpenny a year. Do you ever consider how you will have to scrape?’

Janet smiled and sighed.

‘I daren’t think too much about it, because it seems such happiness. I don’t deserve anything so good. Oh, Isabel, you don’t know Walter!’

The other girl opened her mouth to speak, and closed it again. Then she sat down at the piano, and said to a running accompaniment, ‘It’s your own business; don’t be afraid of my interfering. Are you going to stay on

here? I'm not sorry you should, because of course you have wanted some extra things, and how I should have got them out of the house allowance, I don't know.' She added bitterly—'Being ill is a luxury which should be confined to the rich.'

'Oh, Isabel,' cried Janet, with tears in her eyes, 'it does seem hard that I should have all the good things!'

'I'm not envious, I assure you,' said her sister, with quick repudiation of Mr. Rose. 'Don't think I begrudge you *any* thing, not even your broken arm. But—shall you stay?'

'If you really don't want me. Miss Ellison has gone home, and Mrs. Winyeatt pretends that she will be very lonely if I leave her. Of course, that is all her kindness.'

Isabel assured her again that she had better remain where she was. As she was going out of the room, she looked back to say—

‘Let me know if you hear anything more about Lucy. I shan’t get that new dress I was talking about if there’s any chance of my having to be bridesmaid.’

Soon after luncheon, Mrs. Winyeatt came into the drawing-room, and joined Janet, who was standing on the balcony. The sea was unusually still, a beautiful even greyness spread over sky and water, broken only by one short sharp dazzling line of white just below the horizon. A heavy collier with grimy sails was beating up to the harbour, and there was a constant roar and scrape of waves breaking and dragging back on the shingly beach. Higher up a fishing-boat was being drawn up by a windlass, and a crowd collecting to see the shining spoils. Norma stood and looked at it silently, with a troubled yearning in her beautiful eyes. Then she turned impulsively to Janet.

‘Such a sea as that makes one feel how

small one is, makes one ashamed of all one's foolish little frets and discontents! You don't feel it yet, Janet, but some day you will, and then you will find out how good it is to sweep cobwebs away from our dusty selves.'

'But the sea—the sea is so big!' said the young girl, shrinking.

'One wants something big. Don't you often feel how small the things are on which we set our thoughts? Then to see a mighty force like that, true to its laws, made to work for the world's good—it seems to rest one. I don't feel so weak when I see great powers at work, because they help one to realise what one has to fall back upon. Aren't you often conscious of being dreadfully small yourself, Janet?'

'Oh, I might be, but you couldn't, dear Mrs. Winyeatt!'

Oh,' cried Norma impulsively, 'how little you know! If one had a larger love, things

would be so much easier, it would be happiness to give up one's own will, and now—now it is very hard. That's a proof in itself of how small I am. Don't think of me in that way, Janet,' she added humbly, 'think of me as very weak; even when what is right is quite plainly shown, I haven't the moral courage to keep to it.'

'Dear Mrs. Winyeatt!' repeated the girl, laying her cheek softly against her friend's arm, and awed by this unusual confidence. Norma was silent for a moment, then said suddenly—

'I am not quite happy about Agnes, she looks so heavy-eyed and tired. I have left her asleep in my room, and if she is not better when she wakes, I shall send for Mr. Kennedy.'

This was the beginning of illness. It did not come on quickly, but a sort of low fever took hold of the little girl, and prostrated her

completely. Norma was terribly anxious, too anxious, indeed, to be a very good nurse, so that the doctor got in a trained woman, and Miss Ellison was more in the house than out of it. But it was a bad time for them all. Janet stayed on; Norma said nothing, but Miss Ellison had told her she was sure her remaining there might be a comfort, and these two good friends did not spare themselves. The round of life seemed to contract itself into a very small circle; day by day brought much the same things to be done, the same watchfulness, varied only—but oh, how much varied!—as fear or hope got the upper hand. The passionate intensity of Norma's affection, generally restrained in outward signs of expression, now forced itself through these restraints. Miss Ellison used to look at her with anxiety, and wonder if what they dreaded came, how she would bear it. She did not fear her breaking down while

there was anything to be done, but she did fear, very much, how it would be should Agnes be taken. Once, when the little girl was very ill, she went into Norma's bedroom to fetch something the nurse wanted, and as she opened the door, having had no answer to her knocks, she heard a bitter cry, 'Oh, Paul, Paul, I have not neglected *her*!' Miss Ellison walked straight up to her.

'Norma,' she said severely, 'if you give way to fancies, you will not be of the smallest use to the child when she is getting well again. No one can have had better nursing so far, but you are the one to whom she will look by-and-by, and I hope to goodness you are not going to fail us then.'

'She will not get well again,' said the mother, with a groan. But she rose up and let fall her hands.

'God knows,' said Miss Ellison gravely; 'you don't, and you've no business to

despair. Nurse wants some methylated spirit.'

She had roused Norma, and she was not afraid of being misunderstood. But things did not improve—indeed they looked very grave ; every day there was a little loss of ground, a little drawing nearer to the border-land.

Janet's patience and unselfishness were very useful. She was never in the way, yet always ready for anything that was wanted, and the spring of happiness in her own heart made her hopeful, when the older woman, more used to death and to sadder things than death, almost gave up hope. The two were together one evening in the drawing-room. It had been a wet wild day, gusts of wind and rain rushed angrily against the house, and in the intervals between the air seemed full of sound, the hoarse roar of the great sea. Janet had made them close the shutters early, and light a fire ; she hoped that if Norma

came in, the cheerful light and warmth might be pleasant to her. But Norma did not leave the sick room, it was Miss Ellison who appeared instead. She looked very grave and very tired, and as she stood silently by the fire, Janet took her hand softly and smoothed it with ready sympathy. Miss Ellison turned and smiled.

‘What should we do without you in the house, Janet? You don’t know how good it is to have a background comforter, always ready to be fallen back upon. You are a lesson to me; for though I believe nature has given me a good will, it is an aggressive good will, it is always poking itself to the front.’

‘You say that,’ said Janet smiling. ‘But I am not quite a goose; I know what your good will is worth.’

‘So do I—that’s the worst of it. Janet, I am afraid things are as bad as they can be. I sha’n’t go home to-night.’

‘Do you mean——’ began the girl, turning pale. ‘Oh, poor Mrs. Winyeatt!’

‘Yes, it will be very hard for her.’

‘Her only child! Oh, how can she bear it?’

The two were silent for some minutes. They sat staring into the fire, while outside the wind shook the windows. Then Miss Ellison put the question, ‘Did you see Lucy’s letter this afternoon?’

‘Yes,’ Janet answered.

‘And what did she say?’

‘She was dreadfully sorry, of course. Perhaps—I don’t know—perhaps she doesn’t quite understand how *very* bad it is?’

‘Does she speak of coming back?’

‘Yes, she said she had thought of it, and had more than half a mind to come, but then she reflected that it would be only selfishness, for the house had enough people in it already, and she might be in the way. I am afraid it is my being here which has kept her away.’

‘Oh no, my dear,’ said Miss Ellison, with a smile, ‘it is her being there. By the way, where is she?’

‘She was just going to stay with Mr. Lawrence’s father and mother.’

‘Ah!’

‘I am very sorry,’ said Janet heartily; ‘it would have been so charming for her to be there under any other circumstances, and now it must all be spoilt by her anxiety!’

‘We will hope that she does not, as you say, quite understand,’ said Miss Ellison dryly. ‘But I don’t know why we should be particularly prodigal of our sympathy over this second visit? What should have made it so delightful?’

Janet smiled.

‘Now you are pretending. You know as well as I do, that we all thought that Mr. Lawrence liked Lucy.’

‘No, I don’t, indeed. Who are “we all”? You and Isabel?’

‘And you, and Mrs. Winyeatt, and——’ she checked herself.

‘Oh, you young imaginations, how cheerfully you start on a career! I don’t believe Mrs. Winyeatt thinks it, and I am sure I don’t. As for your mysterious “and,” whoever that may be, advise her not to build upon such insecure foundations.’

She spoke with energy. The girl looked blankly at her and then laughed.

‘Miss Ellison, but—I don’t want to be rude, but—indeed—I don’t think you can quite know.’

‘And you think your “and” does. No, my dear, trust me, she *doesn’t*.’

‘Then I am very sorry,’ said Janet very gravely, ‘and—and I almost wish that Lucy would come home. I shall tell her not to think about the house being full, because, of course, I could leave directly she came, and

her being here would be a comfort to Mrs Winyeatt.'

Miss Ellison took no notice of this remark. She leant forward to poke the fire, and said incidentally—

'I don't feel very kindly towards Mr. Lawrence. After all the hospitality that was shown him, and considering his old acquaintanceship, he should have given some sign of sympathy in this trouble.'

'Lucy said that he seemed very sorry,' replied the girl eagerly.

'But he sent no message?'

'No, there was no message.'

'Then I am disappointed in him. It is heartless. Though perhaps if Lucy does not realise it thoroughly, she does not allow her friends to do so either. I shall put it down to that; I shall not give up Mr. Lawrence yet. How it rains! Now I shall try to get Norma out of the room. My only

chance of doing it was to come away first myself.'

But Norma would not leave the little girl. To all Miss Ellison's arguments and entreaties she answered by a mute gesture of refusal. Sometimes Miss Ellison, sometimes the nurse dozed off, but the mother always sat there alert, watchful, her yearning eyes fixed on the little cropped head that moved restlessly upon the pillows, now and then murmuring some tender soothing word, then silent, silent as death itself, silent with an almost sickening longing for the sleep which was such a little common thing, yet which now seemed almost the greatest thing in all the world, the sleep which a king's ransom could not buy, the sleep which, alas! did not come. When the light of morning crept into the room, how she hated it!—because night was the time when people slept, and this intruding daylight was here to thrust it out, and allow them all

to look pitifully at her, because the child had not slept, and was therefore, they would say, worse. For this cause she dreaded the doctor's coming at one moment, and the next longed for it, torn by the hope that he might bring help, and the fear that he might rob her of her last shred of hope.

When he came, she would not ask him, she dared not, and he did not at once give his opinion. When at last he did, it was not worse, it was even, so she persuaded herself, guardedly better ; no loss of strength, in spite of the restless night ; a little improvement as to temperature. And, indeed, from this time Agnes began to mend ; by slow degrees at first, then with the quick return of vital power which in a child often amazes us, and the mother's happiness was very good to see, for it seemed as if she could not be thankful enough, and her thankfulness took in those who had shared her trouble. She was like a

girl again. Agnes, one day, propped in a great arm-chair, looked at her in wonder.

‘I don’t think your eyes used to be so bright, mother,’ she said dreamily at last.

‘I am sure they weren’t,’ said Norma, kissing her.

‘What makes them so?’

‘Being glad,’ her mother answered. And, indeed, there was good ground for the little girl’s observation.

But, before this, one day Norma was walking back with Miss Ellison to her house. The day was fine, but there was a high wind which drove clouds of foam over the little jettys running out here and there for the use of fishermen, and grey gulls were flying with wild cries about the white cliffs.

‘And Lucy is at the Lawrences?’ Miss Ellison was saying.

‘Yes. Mary!’

‘Well?’

‘I want you to put out of your head all that foolish talk you and I had at Calais. I have seen very clearly of late that it was both foolish and based upon an altogether mistaken idea, and I am very much ashamed that I should ever have—have let you imagine more than existed.’

‘Oh!’ returned Miss Ellison. ‘But let me understand. What has given you this clearness of vision?’

‘A return of common sense, I suppose,’ Norma replied impatiently. ‘No, I believe that when I came face to face with a great reality, imaginary feelings dropped off.’

‘Norma, I don’t think real love should be called imaginary.’

‘This could not have been real.’

‘Do you say that because he has made no sign of life in all this trouble?’

‘Neither now nor before. He left Dover without leaving so much as a word of fare-

well—that was too abrupt. And now—I thought at least he cared a little for Agnes!’

‘Perhaps you never received the word,’ suggested the other woman slowly.

‘Mary!’ In the heat of her indignation, Norma stood still. ‘When you say things like that I wonder how we can ever be friends! Lucy has her faults, but she is not false.’

‘Did I mention her name?’ asked Miss Ellison meekly. ‘Well, no doubt it is as you say. Mr. Lawrence is the one to blame’—she glanced at Norma; but Norma was looking straight before her—‘and I am glad that you have not allowed it to trouble you.’

‘I ought not perhaps to let you suppose that,’ said Norma in a very low voice, ‘for I do think about it more than I should. But I have learnt a lesson, and in that time when Agnes was so ill, I thought I had learnt it thoroughly. Since then, it has come back a

little, but—give me time, Mary,' she added hastily.

'You are the most honest-hearted woman I know,' commented Miss Ellison inwardly. All that she said aloud was—'Well, don't let your anxiety to learn lessons make you either morbid or unjust. Is Lucy enjoying herself very much?'

'Very much. She likes the Lawrences, and does not talk of coming away.'

Miss Ellison stopped to look down at a sheet of tumbling waves.

'If she and Mr. Lawrence are going to marry, I only hope they will make haste about it. It is another proof, if I ever needed one,' she said, 'that people do get what they set their minds upon in this world, provided——'

'What?'

'Oh, there is no use in my telling you; you would only be angry with me.'

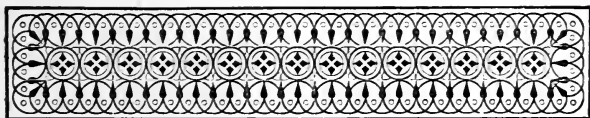
To this Mrs. Winyeatt made no answer, but she said presently—‘Lucy would be a very good wife. I have never succeeded in making her feel quite at home here, and she has no exact responsibility, but, thrown on herself, and with others dependent upon her—you would see!’

‘Well, I am not yet persuaded that Mr. Lawrence is to be the worker of this metamorphosis. If he is—he is welcome to it!’

She was, however, more uneasy and annoyed than she allowed herself to show, for she had always hoped that Norma would marry again, and this was the first time that she had ever ventured to think it possible. Moreover, she was sure that Lawrence would have been the right husband; his was a strong, sensible, cheerful yet sympathetic nature—the qualities do not always go together, but where they do they make an excellent whole—he would be able to appreciate Norma’s

noble character, and at the same time to check the over-sensitive and morbid tendencies which now and then troubled the friend to whom they were completely alien. To say the truth, she considered Norma's scruples about Lucy, and the idea which doubtless possessed her that she owed some atonement to Paul's sister, both high-flown and absurd, but she loved her for and through all, and longed that a richer earthly happiness might be hers. Hitherto, she had been confident that Mr. Lawrence would not suffer himself to be drawn aside, but her faith in man was at no time so strong as to be invulnerable, and Lucy absent, presented stronger fascinating possibilities than Lucy present, and, it must be owned, at times exasperating.





CHAPTER XVII.

Heaven holds her forth two mirrors,
One for truth and one for errors !
That looks hideous, fierce and frightful,
This is flattering and delightful ;
That she throws away as foul ;
Sits by this to dress her soul.—SWIFT.



LUCY'S home letters, which described her surroundings as both blissful and attractive, were not quite frank, for the moments when she found them so were sometimes separated by long intervals and by more weariness than she would have liked to confess. She grew heartily tired of her life at King's Ferry, but she would not shorten the length of her stay, however much

tempted by impatience, because that would also mean shortening her stay in the neighbourhood, which she wanted to prolong by all the means in her power. Then of course there were days when she saw nothing of George Lawrence, though she showed marvellous ingenuity in forging a chain of small engagements, and even at the cost of much personal suffering, tried to attract the spoiled Lionel. But in this she was seldom, if ever, successful, and she suffered many small torments, which, it is to be feared, were intentional, at the hands of Lionel and Pat, besides those provided quite incidentally by the Duffer, who entangled himself hopelessly in her dresses, upset her ink, and broke anything he so much as looked at. To George Lawrence she spoke of them as dreadful children, always in the way, and wearing their mother to a shadow by the manner in which they quarrelled and fought to carry

out their own wills; but before Mrs. Russell herself she so successfully concealed her real opinions, that the mother believed Lucy to bestow her admiration with perfect sincerity.

All this, however, made her visit rather a trial to her. Then it was a small and scrambling establishment, they dined early for the sake of the children, and Lucy, who liked her comforts—liked ease and luxury and the good things of life—hated Mrs. Russell's domestic arrangements. Nor, except perfect friendliness, which had really existed before, could she in her wiser moments feel that there was anything between herself and Lawrence. But then wiser moments only came at intervals, and she had always accustomed herself to expect admiration, so that she really read it where it did not exist to read, and was sometimes persuaded that he was only waiting his opportunity.

Then came the illness of Agnes.

Lucy realised its gravity with terror. She was sincerely sorry for Norma, but the terror belonged to the possible collapse of the little arrangements which she had carefully built up, and which she really regarded with something of the pride an artist would take in his work. This did not prevent such real grief as kept her awake on the night the worst account came, when she tossed and turned and was haunted by the thought of the mother's misery; but, on the other hand, neither did her anxiety become sufficiently impulsive to allow her in an unguarded moment to betray it either to Mrs. Russell or to Lawrence. If they knew, they might think she should return; if he knew, his sympathies with Norma would certainly be dangerously quickened, and he might not be content with a mere message such as could without difficulty be forgotten, he might take it into his head to write himself, and thus revive the

interest which she persuaded herself had more than waned. She spoke of the child's illness, therefore, as a little feverish attack; and as Mrs. Russell could immediately present varied experiences of that kind for each of her children, and there was certainly no appearance of their having suffered in strength or vitality, Lawrence had no suspicion of what the woman he loved was enduring, and confined himself to warm expressions of sympathy, which he never doubted that Lucy made known. He was hurt at the blank silence with which Norma had fenced herself round, feeling that he had done nothing to deserve it, and Lucy's tactics had so far succeeded that he began to fear there was no hope for him. But this did not affect his love.

When Lucy left King's Ferry for Marlham, things were at their worst at Dover, and she cried a little as she drove along in the fly, but not too much, because she did not wish Martin

to know how anxious she was. She had been afraid, throughout, that one of the other servants might write to Martin from home, but, fortunately for her, Norma's maid was not on very friendly terms, and the others were too busy. If she had not been unhappy the drive from Rivermouth would have been pleasant, through the pretty overgrown lanes, still freshly green, though autumn had come at least in name, between scattered cottages and orchards of rosy apples. The road curved and made quick descents, and clambered up again, and here and there overlooked a silver gleam of river, lying between woods, and the pale colouring of the fields from which the corn had been reaped broke the monotony of green if it had ever existed. Presently the church tower came into sight, and beyond it a dark clump of Scotch firs, and in a few minutes the fly had turned into the shrubbery of the rectory.

Major Macarthy was ready to receive their guest, for his hospitable instincts never failed him, and he talked cheerily as he took her into the hall.

‘The rector has had to go to Stanford on some parochial business, and George has gone with him. But here’s Nelly, and Mrs. Lawrence is in the drawing-room expecting you, and the others will soon be back.’

Mrs. Lawrence looked pale and anxious, but she welcomed the girl eagerly.

‘You are come at last, my dear! I have been listening for wheels for the last hour. But I’m afraid it has been a long and dusty drive.’

‘Not dusty, Fanny,’ put in the major; ‘Saturday’s rain left the ground in first-rate condition.’

‘It was as pleasant as it could be; I never get tired of driving through these lanes of yours,’ said Lucy brightly.

‘Well, we can give Miss Winyeatt plenty of that, can’t we, Nelly? She’ll like to go to Oakbridge, and Fernham, and the High Hill.’

‘George will know where it is best to go,’ put in Mrs. Lawrence decidedly; ‘pray leave it to him.’

‘George hasn’t got up his geography yet. He lost himself the other night coming home,’ remarked Nelly.

‘Yes, in the night; and no wonder, I am sure, with those lanes a perfect tangle, and one exactly like the other.’

‘Exactly,’ said Nelly, *sotto voce*; ‘only Uncle Tim could find his way blindfold.’

Her mother looked vexed. ‘Don’t let us talk about it any more,’ she said, ‘but ring the bell for tea. George said that your little niece was not yet quite well again,’ she added, addressing Lucy. ‘I am so sorry. He says she is a dear little girl.’

‘No, she isn’t well,’ admitted Lucy, shak-

ing her head. 'I hope to have a much better account, though, to-morrow, because, as you know, dear Mrs. Lawrence, children are so quickly up and down. And directly she is at all ailing, her mother is naturally nervous. You see, since dear Paul's death, Norma has no one else, and she is entirely bound up in her.'

'Naturally, poor thing. And I dare say she misses you dreadfully.'

'Ah, she has a most efficient friend with her,' said the girl hastily, 'or of course I should have gone home at once. But—oh, no doubt in a day or two Agnes will be getting well again.'

'Oh yes, you need not suppose it to be anything serious,' said Mrs. Lawrence with cheerful unconsciousness; 'and you must not allow it to make you anxious, for you may be quite sure you would be the first to hear if there were real cause for alarm. I am a little

selfish, too, for I want your visit here to be as happy as we can make it.'

Nelly looked astonished, but Lucy's face flushed with pleasure. At all times she intensely enjoyed being petted and made much of, and it charmed her especially when such appreciation came from Mr. Lawrence's mother. She looked her best and brightest; she managed to smoothe over one or two rough places in the conversation with as much good-will and more tact than Major Macarthy, and Mrs. Lawrence became more and more delighted with her, more firmly impressed with the conviction that here was the very wife for George. Why was he not there? Why was he missing his opportunities? She grew tired at last, but when Major Macarthy, who noticed it, jumped up and proposed taking Lucy to the garden, she was vexed with him.

'That is always the way,' she said with the impatience of weakness; 'you never can

be quiet, you are always dragging people off to see your menagerie, or something !’

‘But I shall come back when you are rested,’ Lucy said, smiling ; ‘oh, you will have enough of me, I assure you !’

It must be owned that some of the things she was called upon to look at, possessed for her no attractions whatever, and it seemed to her extraordinary that Major Macarthy and Nelly should waste so much thought upon a bantam hen which had broken her leg, and had it skilfully bound up by the major. Privately, she also considered Toby such an ugly specimen of a dog that the enthusiasm bestowed upon him seemed to her ridiculous ; but she was very careful to be enthusiastic herself, and having a clever memory, inquired for all that had been pointed out to her at her former visit. An odd-looking shrivelled old man, ruddy of face, but much bent, was sweeping in the garden, and appeared to be

on the best terms with the major, who called him Job, and asked for his wife. The old man shook his head.

‘The missus be uncommon bad, sure. Her’s ramping with the sciatics, and do what her will her can’t kep warm.’

‘I’ll come down by-and-by, and see if I can’t rig up something,’ said the major quickly.

The rector and his son did not return until it was time for dinner, but when Lucy descended in a pretty pale pink dress, looking very dainty and well-finished, she found George and his sister in the drawing-room. He greeted her warmly, and apologised for his absence.

‘My father had business in Stanford,’ he said, ‘and, to tell you the truth, I felt I ought to go with him. Nelly won’t believe it, but I don’t think the mare safe for him to drive.’

‘What I say,’ said his sister, ‘is, that Uncle Tim is always ready to go, and that it is simply

nonsense for George to suppose that he can't manage any horse. Who do you imagine drove before you came back?'

'I only wonder you didn't break your necks over and over again,' he returned good-humouredly, 'but then I knew nothing. Now that I am here I must have something to say to the matter, so far as my father is concerned.'

'It's not temper,' argued Nelly.

'No, it's nerves; but it comes to much the same thing. She will try to bolt at the most inconvenient times. What account have you of Agnes, Miss Winyeatt? Is she all right again?'

'Not quite, I am afraid,' Lucy said, with a little gasp of conscience, 'but I hope—in a day or two——'

'Mrs. Winyeatt is not uneasy, is she?' asked Lawrence, looking at her.

'Norma is always uneasy if Agnes' little finger aches.'

He turned away silently, but she was conscious the next morning that when she opened her letters he was watching; and she took care to hold herself well in hand, so as not to betray anything in her face, though she could not prevent her hand from shaking a little. She kept her eyes fixed upon the letter until she had fully mastered its contents, which were more alarming than those of the day before, but the effort was almost more than she could make, and she feared that Lawrence would see her agitation. The very fact of having to crush it back obliged her to simulate a greater cheerfulness than she would otherwise have put on.

‘I hope you have good accounts, my dear?’ inquired Mrs. Lawrence from behind her own letters.

‘Thank you, I don’t think there is much that is new,’ said Lucy, forcing a smile. ‘My letter is from Janet Somerville, and Mr. Law-

rence knows'—she did not look at, though she spoke of him—'that Janet has many other things to think about.'

'Then you need not be uneasy,' said Mrs. Lawrence, nodding. 'Some one else would have written full particulars if it had been necessary. Oh, from what you told me, it was evidently some childish ailment of no real consequence!'

Lucy's hand closed on the letter. 'We are so very unhappy,' it said, 'and I know, dear Lucy, that it will make you miserable to hear how dreadfully ill dear little Agnes is. Mr. Kennedy speaks very gravely of her. It breaks my heart to see dear Mrs. Winyeatt, you can guess what it must be, and how you will be longing to be here! I often think how sad it is for you to be away, and of course this spoils everything.' It was a short note, and there was not a word in it of anything but what concerned Agnes.

Great discussions arose at breakfast as to the best way of amusing their guest. George did not say much, but each other person had a different idea. The rector held that she should be taken to Stanford, to see the old church and castle; the major was desirous to drive her to a course of fine views; Mrs. Lawrence negatived this on account of the mists; and Nelly warmly suggested going out to one of the salmon boats. Lucy's heart fell; it did not seem as if George Lawrence intended to take any part in her entertainment.

‘Please decide for me,’ she said at last, turning to him.

‘Would you like to row about the river?’

‘Yes, indeed I should.’

‘Then Tim and I will get a boat in the Creek, and show you one or two of the fishing villages near at hand.’

‘All right,’ said the major eagerly. ‘And we’d better use poor Tom Frederick’s, because

he's been ill so long, the old fellow can't do any fishing.'

'Rather a cranky affair, isn't it, Tim?' asked the rector.

'Oh, not very bad! I'll go down at once and tinker her up—I've been intending to do it—and by the time you come down she'll be as tight as a trivet. Trust me.'

Mrs. Lawrence caught her son in the study after breakfast.

'George, you really must see that your uncle doesn't drag you all out and drown you in some miserable old boat. It is just what he would do. He only thinks of making friends for himself among those men.'

'I wish I had half as many friends,' said Lawrence, with a laugh. 'Those men, as you call them, would do anything for him. Do you know that he has got Jem Baker to give up drink?'

‘For how long, I wonder?’ she answered.
‘I never trust those sudden conversions.’

‘I should be inclined to think even they were better than none at all. But I believe this has gone on some time.’

Mrs. Lawrence made an impatient movement. ‘Well, we shall see. Only pray be careful about the boat. Nelly has no common sense about such things.’

When the time came, Nelly, however, was missing. After calling for her in all directions, her brother was obliged to give up the search. He looked annoyed as he explained to Lucy that she had probably gone off on some errand of her own.

‘So that I am sorry to say that you must put up with only my companionship to the Creek,’ he added.

She turned towards him with a look of pleasure in her eyes.

‘How pleasant it is of you to give up your

time to me! I am very glad to have you by yourself, because I can mention one or two things that one can't very well talk about before all the world. I want to thank you for making your mother so friendly towards me.'

'If you knew my mother better, you would know that she never could be made to do anything,' he answered.

'Well,' she said, 'then disposing her, if that expresses it better. Is she so determined? Is that where you get your obstinacy?'

'I couldn't say. My father is not behind-hand in the quality. But why do you accuse me of obstinacy?'

They were walking up a hill; Lucy appeared to reflect a short time before she answered—

'I think—I am almost sure that it does belong to you. I think it would be exceedingly hard to persuade you against your will.'

He looked at her as if he were not quite indifferent to what seemed a slight remark.

‘Perhaps you are right,’ he said quietly. ‘Perhaps I am inclined to hold on where wiser men would give up. If that is obstinacy, I had better confess to it at once.’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I think that is what it is.’

‘Still, I am not sure that I could get on without it,’ he added. ‘Do you maintain it to be a weakness?’

Lucy considered again.

‘Isn’t it, at any rate, a mistake to fight against the inevitable?’

‘Where do you find the inevitable? In a woman’s word?’

He spoke quickly and unguardedly, and perhaps would have been glad to withdraw what he had said if he could have done so. But Lucy answered as quickly—

‘That depends upon the woman. With some women I believe you would find it.’

She looked up at him as she spoke, and he winced a little.

‘You should know better than I, who can only speak from the outside. But having just owned to being obstinate, you will not expect to convert me,’ he said after a slight hesitation. ‘I should always hope that time—or circumstances, might modify matters.’

‘Yes,’ she replied slowly, ‘you are right to own that you are obstinate.’

‘But not unreasonably,’ he urged. ‘You will admit so much?’

‘Ah, I can’t do that; we are arguing on such vague theories that I can’t admit anything that has to do with reason.’

‘I did not know they were no more than vague theories,’ he said significantly.

‘Oh yes,’ she returned lightly—‘the vaguest! If you had anything particular in your mind, don’t accuse me of having spoken with intention. Perhaps it was very pre-

sumptuous of me, to have talked about obstinacy at all; I ought to have called it resolution, or firmness, or something more civil. I will do better in future. But now tell me, where does that little zigzag path lead?’

‘Only into an orchard. Will you come? It has a fine view.’

Lucy shook her head. ‘Too wet; I’m not prepared for long grass and nettles.’

They both became silent as they turned down a steep lane towards the Creek. Lucy was pondering on the conversation, which, if it had not produced all she wished for, she yet hoped might bear fruit, when Lawrence said suddenly—

‘In old days I should have described Mrs. Winyeatt as exceedingly impulsive in character.’

She opened her eyes widely.

‘Were you thinking of Norma? You

almost startled me, for, oddly enough, so was I. But I don't think the old Norma and the present can be quite the same person. I don't think she acts from impulse now. I suspect dear Paul's death changed her very much.'

'People's natures generally remain the same, at bottom,' he said rather roughly.

'Yes? Well, of course you can perhaps judge better than I, and I only go by what she says and by what I see. It has struck me more than once—but I won't give you my ideas, for they are very likely to displease you.'

'Very likely,' he said, with the same doggedness of tone, 'but I dare say they are wholesome medicine. Go on.'

'It has struck me,' continued Lucy, trying hard to remember something which Miss Ellison had once said about Norma, 'that it is a sort of reaction against the

impulsiveness for which she blames herself, which makes her more determined than other women when once she has made up her mind. Do you know what I mean ?'

'I suppose so. It's very womanish and unreasonable.'

'Thank you !' she said, with a charming pout. 'And I won't have Norma called unreasonable. It isn't unreasonable—is it?—to think out things thoroughly, and then to act on what she feels to be right.'

'Yes, it is. Half the time it wouldn't be reason at all, only turning an impulse into a solid and really mischievous thing.'

'Now I can't understand you at all,' Lucy returned, shaking her head. 'You should have had it out with Norma herself when you were at Dover, though I don't believe even you would have moved her.'

'Oh, I can't move her !' he said hastily, and then quite inconsequently and in a

changed voice—‘Is she—is Mrs. Winyeatt very unhappy?’

‘Oh, you know how she is bound up in Agnes. I dare say she is making herself most miserable.’

‘I wish I were there,’ muttered Lawrence under his breath, but Lucy, whose ears were extraordinarily sharp, caught the words and felt an added pang of fright. She could not directly answer them, but she said as calmly as she could—

‘Miss Ellison is the very best person in the world to keep up her spirits and prevent her from worrying herself.’

‘Yes,’ said Lawrence, ‘if there is no real cause for alarm.’

‘You will make me nervous,’ replied Lucy, trying to laugh; ‘do you always take such a dark view of things?’

‘Not always,’ he said briefly.

She read a touch of uncertainty in the

answer, and was tempted at any cost to disperse it. But it did cost her something to say—

‘Don’t you suppose they would tell me all?’

‘Yes,’ he said again, ‘one would think so. Unless——’

‘What?’ she asked with a slightly tremulous voice.

‘Mrs. Winyeatt is not a selfish person, and it is possible she wishes to avoid alarming you.’

‘How well you read Norma!’ the girl exclaimed, provoked and frightened out of her self-control. But he did not perceive that anything lay hid behind the plain words, nor did he find anything to answer. He only said more cheerfully—

‘However, let us hope there is nothing so serious behind; and as you say, it is natural to suppose that they would write to you

quite fully. Here we are, and there is Tim at work.'

The Creek was of no great length, but it was well shut in, and protected especially from south-west winds by the high hill down which they had come. A few cottages straggled down to the edge, and there were several boats lying about, some in mud and some in water. The shabbiest of all was that on which Major Macarthy was engaged, with Toby sitting in the stern, but he called out cheerfully that it was water-tight and would be ready in a twinkling.

'You have provided an old tub!' said Lawrence with a laugh, as he took up an oar.

'The worst on the river,' said the major promptly. 'Poor old Tom, luck's been against him all his life; and if his boat goes, I don't know how on earth he'll rub on. I suppose, George, you wouldn't care to lend

him the money for a new one? He and I might guarantee the interest between us, and upon my soul, I don't think it would be a bad speculation.'

'Couldn't I do it?' asked Lucy eagerly. 'If you would let me, Major Macarthy, I shouldn't mind about the interest——'

'Now would you?' cried the major. 'Twould be a real kindness; and if you had a share in the fishing, I do believe, as I said to George, that it might turn out a first-rate investment.'

'Shut up, Tim,' said George authoritatively. 'Miss Winyeatt will do nothing of the kind. Don't ever listen to him, Miss Winyeatt; there never was a man so full of Quixotic ideas for the good of his fellow-creatures. Promise me never to be led into them, or I shall not have a moment's peace.'

'What am I to do, Major Macarthy?' Lucy demanded playfully. But Lawrence looked

so grave that she added at once—‘I will promise to do nothing without leave. Will that content you?’

‘Perfectly. Thank you.’

‘But I do think you couldn’t find a safer thing,’ urged the major meekly. ‘Just consider, George. The profits this autumn have been astonishing. I only wish I had the chance. You won’t? I never saw a fellow with so little enterprise. Miss Winyeatt, if you feel any water under your feet, just speak, will you? and I’ll bale it out at once.’

‘Shall we go back and get a better boat? It’s a shame to have put you into this,’ said Lawrence, stopping rowing, and looking vexed.

But she protested that the boat was dry, and that she was finding everything delightful; and, indeed, there was something very pleasant about the soft, slightly languid atmosphere and in all that was around them. They

were rowing up the river, and the tide was almost high, so that it reached the undergrowth which feathers along the bank on one side, and leans over so as nearly to touch the swift water. Presently the banks grow higher, a picturesque thatched boat-house lies embedded in beautiful woods, just beginning to be warmed by touch of autumn. Here, hugging the shore, lies a silent file of salmon boats watching their nets. On the other side green reaches tempt the red cows to come down to the rich pasture, and to stand so near the water's edge that their reflections break its clear colour. A heron rises heavily, and, long neck outstretched, flies up the river. And further on white cottages with deep thatched roofs, and flowers clambering to the very chimneys, cluster by the water's edge, a woman leans over a low stone wall—stained with infinite variety of colour—and calls to two children who are paddling about in a boat; and tall poles of

uneven height show where the salmon-nets are hung to dry when not in use.

‘I don’t suppose there’s a man about the place,’ remarked Lawrence.

‘No; they’re all fishing. It’s a wonderful opportunity,’ said the major regretfully.

They rowed quietly on. The boat though clumsy was not uncomfortable, and Lucy, if she could have lulled her conscience to sleep, would have very well liked to have been sitting opposite to Lawrence in this dreamy quiet. But she had a conscience. She was, indeed, very careful about it in many ways, and if in others she managed to ignore its promptings, she could not do so easily. If ever Lawrence found out—if Agnes died—if he should carry out an impulse to go back to Dover—to see Norma—where would she be? All these haunting suggestions were like so many sharp small stings.

And now they had got some way up the

river, and the right-hand bank had melted away or run further back, and it was a land of reeds and sedges, where the herons congregated. The picturesque silver-grey birds were standing or stalking about, and Toby's excitement and wonder became almost uncontrollable. But here Lawrence proposed turning round, and the boat, helped by the stream, swept more swiftly down, and behold, all the views and lights were changed, and all the beauty seemed to have taken fresh shape. Major Macarthy, idly dipping his oar, began to talk about the creatures, fish, bird and beast, which haunted the river ; it seemed as if he knew them all, where the herons had their favourite fishing-grounds, where the water rats lived, where the kingfishers darted along the banks. He talked of them all delightfully, with an extraordinary love and knowledge, and Lucy, who at first had not cared to attend, felt as if a new world were being opened

before her. She said so to Lawrence as they climbed the steep lane from the Creek, the major having lingered behind to make the boat secure, and to carry its hire to old Tom, who stood watching them and grumbling at the door of his house.

‘Yes—poor old Tim,’ said Lawrence gravely. ‘Small wonder that Nelly—and my father, too—find him such a charming companion! I don’t know his equal when you get him on those subjects.’

‘Is Mrs. Lawrence quite so fond of him?’ she asked with a little hesitation.

He shook his head and laughed. ‘No; that’s pretty plain, isn’t it? She lives in an agony lest he should ruin us all; and I’m bound to say he would do it if he had the chance—with the best intentions in the world.’

‘He seems to be always wishing to give.’

‘Give! He would give the boots off his

feet. He is an amiable communist, very much out of his place here.'

His words were destined to receive a practical illustration, for Mrs. Lawrence met them in the hall, and when Lucy had enthusiastically praised the morning's amusement provided for her, and as luncheon was waiting, run upstairs to get ready for it, Mrs. Lawrence turned to her son.

'What do you suppose your uncle has been doing now?' she demanded with a shocked face.

'What?'

'Giving away the very blankets from his bed! No, George, it is no laughing matter. What security have we that he will not lay hands upon anything else in the house?'

'Come, mother! It's his own bed.'

'They are our blankets. Hannah came to me this morning, with such a face, to tell me that one of the major's blankets was missing.

Even she was horrified. As for your father, I am out of patience with him. He can only laugh.'

'Well, have it out with Tim, if you must, in private, and don't let us have these domestic squabbles for public amusement.'

He spoke with a sharper ring in his voice than was at all usual with him, but the conversation with Lucy had left a soreness in his heart, and the petty annoyances which met him in his home were irritating. He loved his mother warmly ; at the same time he wished, with a man's impatience, that she would not keep her troubles constantly expressed in her face, particularly when he was doing his best to relieve her from them.

Major Macarthy came in late, cheerfully content with anything which might be left for him, and unconscious of an impending cloud. But Mrs. Lawrence caught him as he was passing the door of the study afterwards.

‘Tim, may I ask what has become of your blanket?’

‘Oh, I took it down to old Betty Morrish last evening. To be sure, I ought to have mentioned it to Hannah; I dare say she was rather surprised. But Betty was in such pain, and Job said she felt the cold so much, that I couldn’t help taking it to her. I knew you would like her to have it.’

‘When I wish to give away my blankets, I prefer to do so myself. Perhaps you will kindly remember that in future,’ said Mrs. Lawrence, feeling as if she had put a great restraint on herself in saying no more. But something in her tone made Major Macarthy look at her and redden.

‘I assure you, Fanny, I mean to buy one the first time I go into Rivermouth.’ He hastily thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out some silver. ‘I know I must have got enough—what does a blanket cost?—six

or eight shillings? Oh, well, I know I've enough; or if I haven't, Nelly will lend me some.'

Mrs. Lawrence turned away, with a gesture of despair.

'It's of no use; it's impossible to impress upon you the commonest laws of—honesty,' she would have liked to have said, but she changed it to—'justice. You are absolutely and entirely unpractical.'

'I dare say you are right,' he said wistfully. 'I'm awfully sorry to be a worry to you, Fanny. I believe I ought to go away, only this has always been such a home to me, and I—I have cared so much for you all. But—I believe I ought to go.'

He was turning from the room in an utterly dejected and dispirited manner, and she stood still without a movement. But as he reached the door she followed him quickly, holding out her hands.

‘Tim!’ she said.

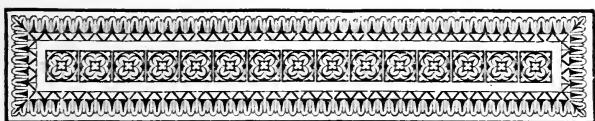
‘Yes, Fanny.’

She was half crying, and she spoke very quickly—

‘What I said was quite true, for you’re the most unpractical man that ever lived, and you don’t know what mischief you do when you meddle with our money matters, but—I never saw any one so sweet-tempered, and you make me ashamed of myself. Don’t go. I dare say I shall be as cross as ever to-morrow, and I won’t—no, I won’t have my best blankets given to that tiresome old Betty; but—you mustn’t mind what I say, and you mustn’t go.’

So the major stayed.





CHAPTER XVIII.

Misfortune stands with her bow ever bent
Over the world ; and he who wounds another,
Directs the goddess by that part he wounds
Where to strike deep her arrows in himself.—YOUNG.



THAT afternoon George Lawrence went off without taking a horse, or telling any one where he was going. Mrs. Lawrence was evidently annoyed at his departure, and Nelly, upon whom was thrown the care of their guest, openly grumbled. It was now too late in the year for sitting out, except on specially fine days, and this one was not above the average. Lucy yawned when she was not seen, pro-

nounced against a drive with Major Macarthy, and a walk with Nelly, and charmed Mrs. Lawrence by saying she would best like to stay with her. She took some time in her own room, writing a long and affectionate letter to Norma. She did not say more than she felt, but she felt better for having said it; it allowed her to suppose that her sympathy had taken at least some sort of solid form, and she was able to pour out much that it had been real pain to her to keep closely locked within. But at last she dried her eyes, and went down to the study, where Mrs. Lawrence was eagerly awaiting her, and at once began.

‘I do not like your staying with me this afternoon, but you don’t know the comfort that it is to have some one with whom I can talk unreservedly. You have the gift of understanding without elaborate explanations. However, I am not going to hold forth upon ourselves. I want you to tell me more of

your own life. It seems to me rather sad that you should have no one nearer to you than a sister-in-law.'

Lucy came and knelt by her side caressingly.

'Dear Mrs. Lawrence,' she said gently, 'it is so sweet and dear of you to think of me! It is—even you can't tell how different it is from a real home of one's own. But very few people realise this—even Mr. Lawrence, I am sure, never saw it,' she added.

'No,' said the elder woman, 'because he is a man, and men are not quick to understand the little rubs which we poor women feel at every turn. But I can realise it all.'

'It is hard sometimes,' Lucy went on thoughtfully, 'to be misunderstood, and—and hampered. But you must not think that Norma does not mean to be kind. And I dare say I am quite as much of a trial to her.'

'I don't think you would be a trial to any

one,' said Mrs. Lawrence warmly; and Lucy, who thoroughly enjoyed this appreciation, gave her hand an affectionate squeeze. Like many others, when she was praised she was always confident that she was understood.

'Dear Mrs. Lawrence!' she murmured again.

'Well, you will have a home of your own one day, I dare say before very long,' said the other, 'and I for one shall be extremely glad. One must be sorry for girls placed in thoroughly false positions, with relations who are only relations in name, not in sympathy.'

'No,' Lucy agreed, 'not in sympathy. That is just it.'

'George has never said much about your sister-in-law. What is she like? Is she much older than you?'

'Yes, a good deal older. Hasn't he spoken of her? Most people think her very beautiful.'

‘Very beautiful!’ Mrs. Lawrence lifted her delicately-marked eyebrows in wonder, for the idea of great beauty in connection with Lucy’s sister-in-law had not occurred to her. ‘I am surprised,’ she said thoughtfully, ‘that George has not spoken of it—but he is sometimes curiously fastidious in taste, and it is quite possible he may not be of that opinion.’

‘Perhaps not,’ Lucy answered, taking up a piece of knitting. ‘May I go on with this? I have not brought down my own work.’

‘Do, my dear. Very beautiful!’ she repeated once more. An idea had flashed upon her which she found singularly unwelcome, for she had formed her own opinion of Norma, and it was not favourable. Surely George would not be so foolish as to throw away his chance of winning this pretty, fair-haired, unconscious girl, now sitting so contentedly by her side, for a handsome,

imperious, hard-natured woman who would separate him from them all again! And yet men were so little to be trusted in matters of this sort, that no traditions of common sense could yield her comfort.

Then she recovered herself, and turned to Lucy with a smile.

‘We suit each other very well, I think,’ she said; ‘or is it that you try to suit? Most people would find an old woman’s society very dull.’

‘You are not old, and you are not dull,’ Lucy returned merrily, ‘and I feel as much at home as if I had lived here all my life.’

‘That’s good,’ returned Mrs. Lawrence warmly. ‘It does me good to hear you say it as if you meant it. Nelly is restless. She would stay with me if I wished it, but she would all the time be longing to be in the open air, with dogs or horses. Nelly should have been a boy. She is thoroughly trustworthy and

straightforward, but she wants softening. I can see that it annoys George. When he marries his wife will not be like Nelly.'

Lucy stooped to pick up the ball of wool.

'Perhaps he will not marry,' she said.

'Yes, he will. It would not surprise me if he married soon. A man cannot always be running over the world. I shall be glad when what I expect arrives, and I wish—yes, I earnestly wish that I could choose his wife.'

She watched the girl as she spoke, and Lucy was quite aware of the look. She met it for a second, and then turned away with a quick movement which might be taken for shyness, for she desired Mrs. Lawrence to understand that the idea was not new to her, and she conveyed this impression so well that the mother felt convinced that George had in some manner created it. Even then—so full are we of contradictions—a pang of jealousy stabbed her, but it passed, and she

leaned back in her chair with a sigh of relief. She did not, however, venture to say more on the subject, contenting herself with trying, as she thought, to draw out Lucy, and unconscious that the girl read her object quite easily, and said only as much or as little as seemed to her expedient, while she charmed her questioner by her candid air. To the mother, at any rate, the afternoon passed quickly, and she was pleased that when Lawrence returned, he should find her and Lucy happily together.

‘Ah, George,’ she cried, ‘come in! I don’t know where you have betaken yourself, but I have not had such a pleasant talk for a long time.’

‘I am glad of that, mother,’ he replied, ‘and I am afraid you will not thank me for disturbing it; but I thought Miss Winyeatt might be anxious for her letters, so I went to the town for them.’

‘Ah, that explains!’ said Mrs. Lawrence, smiling. ‘Have you rowed all the way? How hot you look!’

Lucy had turned a shade paler as he put the letter into her hand. She would gladly have postponed receiving news which she dreaded, until the morning, when she had intended that Martin should bring her letters at once to her room, and give her time to arrange herself. Here she felt as if with Lawrence’s keen eyes upon her she could not preserve her composure, her hand trembled as she opened the envelope, and all the first sentences seemed blurred and indistinct. Then, with a great effort, she mastered herself, and seeing that the news was good, her colour came back, she read steadily on, glanced back at the beginning, laid down the letter, and looked up with a smile.

‘Do you know, Mr. Lawrence,’ she said, ‘that you are the kindest person possible?’

Hardly any one would have thought that I might be anxious, and taken all that trouble. I am very grateful.'

'She is better?' he said with eagerness.

'Oh, she is much better! They seem to think one need have no more fears.'

'Then she has been very ill,' Lawrence remarked gravely.

Lucy bit her lip, recognising her imprudence.

'You know that Norma would be fearful,' she said with quickness.

'Norma is a very curious name; I can never quite reconcile myself to it,' put in Mrs. Lawrence, glancing at her son. He showed no sign of having heard.

'Do you feel confident that they tell you the truth now?' he asked at last.

'Quite—quite confident! I hope they have told me the truth throughout,' replied Lucy, rising with a little touch of dignity in

her manner. 'I think, as there is still time, I will write and say how glad I am. Shall I add that you rather doubt their statements?' she added, returning to her lighter manner.

Lawrence also appeared to have recovered himself.

'Say that I rejoice to hear them. Pray say as much for me as I should like to express for myself,' he added in a lower voice at the door. Then he strolled to the window, and stood looking out, with his hands thrust into his pockets.

'That is a very nice girl. The more I see of her, the better I like her,' said Mrs. Lawrence, cordially.

'Yes, she's a favourite. I'm glad you get on,' he replied, without turning.

'And I am always sorry for girls who have no home of their own.'

'No home?' he repeated, wheeling round.

'Well, only with a sister-in-law.'

‘Oh!’ he laughed. ‘You needn’t pity her for that. They pull together admirably.’ Then, as if dismissing the subject, he said, ‘I wish you’d try to prevent my father from driving that chestnut mare. He’s not up to her, but he will take her out, and now he and Nell are off somewhere.’

‘I do think you are inclined to take alarm unnecessarily,’ said Mrs. Lawrence. ‘He drove her constantly before you came home.’

‘That may be. He may do it once too often.’

‘Well, George, the mare is your own, and you can either sell, or refuse to allow her to be driven.’

‘My father’s so uncommonly fond of her that I don’t like to do the first, and it would hurt him awfully if I denied her to him. If he would only let me drive him, it would be all right.’

‘My dear George, do you think yourself so superior to your father?’

‘I’ve had a tolerably large experience in the way of queer cattle. But he could manage well enough if he kept his attention fixed. What always puts me in a funk is the way in which he falls into some talk which interests him, and lets the reins drop on her back. She isn’t safe to treat carelessly.’

‘But he has Nelly,’ said his mother, staggered.

‘Nelly and Tim are both slap-dash whips, always inclined to run races or whisk round corners. Well—I dare say the fates will favour them; but if you can persuade my father quietly, I should be glad. Tim’s not a bit of good; he encourages him.’

‘Yes, and does his best to make him as foolish as he is himself,’ Mrs. Lawrence replied severely; for in spite of the little scene between them, she had not condoned Major

Macarthy's offences. 'You are sure that he is not leading him into more money scrapes?'

'I don't believe there is the wherewithal to be led,' said Lawrence, shortly.

He was feeling out of sorts. The yearning for Norma—to see her, to hear her voice—had lost none of its intensity; rather it seemed that at this time, when some subtle link of sympathy warned him that she was in trouble, it was stronger than ever. As he stood there, looking out at the rectory garden, a little sodden and untidy, leaves dropping here and there upon it, shrubs wanting to be repressed, autumn flowers straggling, a couple of robins hopping fearlessly about—it all faded from his sight. He saw Norma's sweet and noble face bending over her child, the beautiful eyes dimmed by watching, the smile on her lips tremulously tender, every line of her stooping figure instinct with that strong mother's love, which to a true man seems the

most adorable thing in all the world. To this day Lawrence maintains that he did so see her, and that it was Norma's very self, as she hung over the little girl.

It was, at any rate, so strong a presentment that it left him with a passionate inclination to write to her. He had even a wild impulse to go ; but Lucy's presence was an absolute bar to this. Besides, if there had been danger, and of this he was confident, it had now passed away ; his sudden appearance would be very startling and uncomfortable for Mrs. Winyeatt. No, he could not go. Still, he might write. He would not say anything which could vex or disturb her, but surely his old friendship, his intimacy with them of late, gave sufficient excuse for an expression of sympathy ; indeed, in a few moments they had presented themselves as such very effective reasons, that he began to feel as if he had been brutal in not writing before.

Remembering, however, that Lucy's bulletins had treated the illness lightly, he felt that he might say for himself that, like her, he had been kept in ignorance.

Lucy would have been greatly perturbed had she known that the bag which conveyed her letter of genuine delight to Norma, contained another written in Lawrence's marked handwriting. True to his covenant with himself that he would say nothing that should vex or disturb her, he abstained, as he thought, from word of his own love, but it was not difficult to read it between the lines, however well he may have considered he had concealed it.

Such as it was, however, it produced an almost overpowering tumult in Norma's heart. She had put so much pressure on her feelings, that she had pretty nearly succeeded in making them discredit the evidence of her senses. After all, she had argued, he had never told

her in so many words that he loved her, and if it were her own action, or, to be more exact, Janet's broken arm, which had prevented it, still it remained unsaid, and—it was possible she might have deceived herself. Then, of late, she had been so much engrossed by one class of emotions, anxiety for her child, that all others had, as it were, been crowded out, so that now when they claimed entrance again they appeared to have gained a surprising force, and to sweep down the barriers she had erected as if they were so much card paper. It frightened her to feel that it was so. She had imagined that the interval had put an end to dreams of which she had unwillingly admitted the existence, instead of which it appeared only to have given them fresh strength. And here on their side, charged with a strange unexpected power, speaking with more eloquence than the bare words seemed to express, came this letter. Until she had it, she never knew

how intensely she had yearned for it, how cruel the silence she had herself created had been, but, finding this out by its coming, in the solitude of her room she gave way to the eager gladness of her heart, reading it again and again, and pressing it to her lips. Never, she thought, were words more manly, more tender, more delicate! And while she had blamed him, he had been thinking of her. Then she saw what in the first tide of delight she had passed unnoticed, that he had not known the whole, he had never known the whole; but from the expression he used, that he could not but guess that Miss Winyeatt had been shielded from anxiety by the illness having been treated lightly until fear was over, she was aware that Lucy had held back the truth.

Norma was not naturally a patient woman, and this action of Lucy's brought a passionate throb of anger to her heart. She hated any-

thing underhand or deceitful, hated it with a withering contempt, and she had an immediate impulse to hold the girl's deed up to the unpitying light. Not by way of accusation but as a mere matter of fact she would tell George Lawrence in answer to his letter that nothing had been kept back, and that Lucy knew it all. With a nature such as Norma's, however, stern justice was sure to be soon swept away by a generous impulse. She resolved to say nothing. Lucy—Paul's sister—should be safe from her resentment, should be at liberty to gain what profit she could from her deception. Norma would not even allow herself to speculate what might have been her reasons for it. She turned her thoughts from Lucy, but she suffered them to dwell on Lawrence.

Miss Ellison, as we know, had gone back to her home, but she still spent as much of her time as was possible with Norma, for Agnes needed all their care and nursing. It was

not until some days after she had received the letter that Norma alluded to it. Agnes was dozing in her chair, and her mother and Miss Ellison were in a little room which opened out of the bedroom, when Mrs. Winyeatt suddenly said—

‘You must not do Mr. Lawrence an injustice. When I went back that day after my first walk I found a letter from him.’

Miss Ellison was busily engaged in fitting and arranging some mysterious children's garments, and she did not at once reply. When she spoke it was to say carelessly—

‘What excuse does he make for himself?’

‘For what?’

‘For not having taken the trouble to write before.’

‘Oh, you cannot blame him,’ Norma said quickly; ‘evidently he did not know she had been so ill.’

‘Couldn't he ask—couldn't he find out?’

For some unaccountable reason Miss Ellison appeared to be antagonistic to Lawrence. Norma was silent. Presently she repeated—

‘He did not know.’

‘How strange, and with Lucy on the spot!’ said Miss Ellison, innocently. ‘However, men and women are beyond me, and one must either be for ever making new discoveries or else shutting one’s eyes. For the rest of my life I am going to try shutting my eyes; it is the most peaceful plan. I suppose you did not answer Mr. Lawrence?’

Mrs. Winyeatt reddened.

‘Why should I not?’ she asked.

‘Merely because I thought he was to be snubbed in every possible way, and left to—talk exclusively with Lucy. Wasn’t it so?’

To this question the younger woman made no reply. In a few moments she said—

‘Mary, I believe I was wrong.’

‘I dare say. One always admits that

possibility for other people with the most ready acquiescence. But how?'

'In letting Lucy go.'

'Could you have stopped her?'

'I might have opened her eyes.'

'Oh no, my dear. She can shut hers—as I am trying to shut mine—systematically. Don't be unhappy. Lucy is no fool, and by-and-by will open her eyes of her own accord, which will be a far more effectual process.'

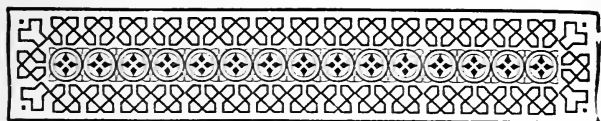
'She may suffer,' Mrs. Winyeatt said slowly.

'Not if she does not care for him. Only her vanity will suffer.'

Norma looked up eagerly.

'No,' she said; 'she does not care for him.'





CHAPTER XIX.

Lightness and laughter are with such as he
Only the surf upon the soul's deep sea.—C. F. BATES.



AS Norma right? Was Lucy heart-whole? Love is a flower about which it is not safe to forecast—it is full of unexpected surprises; it will die where you look for it to flourish, it will spring up in the least likely soils; it grows out of opportunity and neighbourhood and absence, sometimes even out of neglect. Here you water and foster it, and it never shows a leaf; there you feel all is too arid and unlovely, and lo! the tender shoot has

started into vigorous life. Many waters cannot quench it, nor fire destroy. It is one of the enigmas of life—great for evil, but greater, ten thousandfold greater, for good.

Norma's letter gave Lawrence much satisfaction, especially at first. He had not altogether expected an answer, though he told himself repeatedly that there was no reason why it should not come; but it had appeared to him that of late disappointments had arrived without apparent reason, and he did not therefore venture to build largely upon his chances. The letter, however, reached him without delay, and was like the old Norma, frank and friendly. It said that Agnes had been very ill, it did not by so much as a hint imply that Lucy had known all the facts, and it took Lawrence's interest in the child altogether for granted. It put him into good spirits, which his mother attributed to

Lucy's presence, and was watchful not to jar upon with domestic disquiets. Once or twice she let drop words which the girl's vanity was quick to seize and feed upon. Lawrence himself did his utmost to promote the pleasantness of things, not only—if chiefly,—because Lucy was Norma's sister-in-law, and understood the condition, but because he had a real liking for her, and also felt grateful for the improved state of the family atmosphere. To him it fell to propose and carry out plans, for Nelly remained unsuggestive, and the major's ideas were never acceptable to Mrs. Lawrence. He was now engaged upon taming two robins, and enticing them to fly in at the study window and attend afternoon tea. The birds were marvellously at their ease with him, and he was encouraged by all the family except Mrs. Lawrence, who hated their presence for several reasons, principally because she held a

rooted conviction that it was unlucky for a robin to come into the house.

Under Lawrence's conducting, therefore, there were expeditions to places round ; to an old castle, now no more than an ivy-covered shell, but still proudly dominating the wooded valley beneath ; to the most beautiful spots on the moor, where the river which swept broadly past their own village, here rushed in hot impatience over stones and round boulders, and the great hills rose up to their crowning tors, and the deep rich colouring of autumn touched everything with its mournful glory. Lucy, who might not have cared much for these places under other circumstances, found them desirable now, when Lawrence was there, and she, the only stranger, received all his attentions : the few garden parties to which she was also conveyed, were not half so enjoyable.

Time, however, began to make her uneasy.

Her visit could not last much longer, when already she had been for nearly three weeks at the rectory. Once she had proposed leaving, but Mrs. Lawrence had anxiously negatived it. This could not last much longer, and, meanwhile, when would George Lawrence speak? His mother was almost as anxious. It seemed to her nothing but perversity which made him hang back when all that he could wish for was within his reach. More than once she had felt that she must advise, must do something to accelerate matters; then a wiser whisper warned her to refrain, and she resolved, with a sigh, to wait until perhaps the last moment of Lucy's stay. Let her go without protest, she would not.

Lucy had now fixed to leave on Monday, and Thursday had arrived. There was a plan for going on that day to Rivermouth, and there taking a boat for open sea fishing. The weather had been grey and stormy, but with

nothing actually violent about it, and indeed Nelly was vehement in her assurances that it was all that could be wished. They were to start at twelve and take their luncheon with them, when, an hour before, George Lawrence walked into the room where his mother and Lucy were sitting, with a telegram in his hand.

‘I’m sorry to say I must go to Plymouth,’ he said.

‘To Plymouth? What for?’ asked his mother.

‘Hugh Featherstone is ill and going off to the Cape. It’s a bore that it should have happened to-day, but I couldn’t fail him; and Nelly and Tim will take good care of Miss Winyeatt.’

Lucy’s face fell. She had always felt a doubtful dread of this day’s pleasuring, but with Lawrence absent nothing but the dread remained.

‘Please—let us give it up,’ she said hurriedly.

‘Isn’t that a pity?’

‘No, indeed. I would rather not go if you will not be there.’

‘I’m afraid you don’t much trust either Tim or Nelly,’ Lawrence said with a laugh; ‘but they’re really safe on the water, or I wouldn’t suggest your sticking to it.’

Lucy shook her head.

‘I am quite of her opinion,’ said Mrs. Lawrence. ‘Even if she wished it I should certainly not consent to the risk. Nelly I cannot control, but Lucy I know would give way if she saw that I was anxious.’

‘And though I should like you to keep my secret religiously,’ the girl added with mock earnestness, ‘I am a shocking coward myself. When Mr. Lawrence is there I know it is all right, but without him—if you please, I would rather not run into any dangers.’

Mrs. Lawrence looked delighted

‘Must you really go to Plymouth, George?’ she asked gently. ‘There is very little satisfaction in those hurried meetings.’

‘I must go; there’s no question about it,’ he answered at once. ‘I wouldn’t on any account fail old Hugh.’

‘But you’ll come back this evening?’

‘I don’t know. Possibly not.’

‘I shall be very much disappointed if you do not,’ said his mother in an authoritative tone which Lucy felt to be irritating.

‘Don’t you mind—we will try to console her,’ she said, smiling brightly, and George turned to her with a feeling of relief.

‘Then I am sure you will succeed,’ he said in a lower voice which had warmth in it, and gave her a thrill of delight. ‘I hope you understand how much I regret about to-day. I couldn’t help myself.’

‘I understand fully. I am very sorry, too,

but these things will happen at inconvenient moments.'

She had never shown to greater advantage. No sign of disappointment, no pettishness, only a desire to make things easier for him—this was conduct which a man quickly appreciates and for which he cannot but be grateful. He went in search of Major Macarthy, who had been rolling the grass to spare old Job's rheumatic limbs, the robins hopping around him in close attendance. He stopped as George approached, and called out cheerfully—

'Come to take a turn? It's the best exercise in the world. Or is it time to be off?'

'We're not going,' said Lawrence. And then he told him of his change of plans.

'Of course, of course,' said the major. 'How will you get to Stanford? Will you drive, or shall I pull you up the river?'

'The steamer passes in half an hour, so I may as well go in her,' said Lawrence, care-

lessly, 'and I'll find my way back either to night or to-morrow morning. But I say, Tim, Miss Winyeatt doesn't care to go out fishing; will you see that she is taken somewhere, and that Nelly is civil?'

The major promised, and was prompt with suggestions, so that Lawrence felt he might safely trust to his powers of entertainment.

'Don't drive the mare,' he turned back to say, as he was leaving.

'Well, no,' agreed the other regretfully, 'not if you dislike the idea.'

'I dislike it very much.'

'All right; there's the cob.'

As he stood there, upright, but leaning slightly against the handle of the roller, which he held with both hands behind his back, Lawrence looking at him was struck with a vague wonder and pity. This tall, really fine-looking man, in the prime of life—was that life as much wasted as his mother believed?

Something in the open frank expression, something in the trust of the creatures round him, protested against so harsh a judgment, and yet to an active independent mind like that of George Lawrence, it was scarcely credible that such a man should submit to such existence while there was any work to be done in the world, if it were no more than the breaking of stones. All this was true, and still it was also true that such a kindly, warm-hearted life must have its value, might perhaps, so George thought—strangely enough, as he fancied afterwards—be more missed than many another which to the world's eye had made its mark. In the moment that he stood there looking, one of the robins hopped on Major Macarthy's foot, and glanced up confidingly with head cocked on one side.

‘They’re getting so tame, I’m half afraid of stepping on the little rascals,’ he called out with a laugh to George as he turned away

with this little picture in his mind, to stay there—as it turned out—all his life.

When Nelly came out, Tim Macarthy was bringing up the roller against a back wall.

‘Well, have you made up your minds, Nell?’ he called out with great cheerfulness.

‘What’s up for the afternoon?’

‘It’s all very fine, George going off and leaving that girl on our hands! I tell you what, Uncle Tim, it makes me sick to see how mother adores her, and is always thinking how she can marry her to George. I wish he would marry her and have done with it, but I don’t believe it has ever entered his head.’

‘Come, she’s a very nice girl.’

‘Nothing wonderful. And such ages as she has been here! I am sure we’re tired of her, and she of us. However, it isn’t for much longer, thank goodness! As to mother, I never saw anything like her, she would like

to have us all dancing attendance. We've got to take her out on the river this afternoon.'

'All right.'

'Don't let us go till lateish. Four o'clock will do very well.'

An hour before that time the rector appeared outside the study window, and made signs that it was to be opened. When this had been done by Nelly, he called out to his wife—

'I just looked in, Fanny, to say that Harris has sent over from Stoke to say he wants to see me.'

'That's only to get something more out of you. I shouldn't go, if I were you,' returned his wife.

'Nonsense! Women are too ridiculous!'

'Well, you'll see that I'm right. How are you going?'

'I shall drive the chestnut mare.'

‘I hope you won’t do that ; George doesn’t think her safe for you.’

‘Well, upon my word, things are coming to a pretty pass!’ fumed the rector. ‘Anything like the conceit of these young men I never met with ! As if I did not know how to drive ! As if I had not been driving when Master George was in leading-strings ! But it’s all your fault, encouraging him, Fanny. You turn the boy’s head, making him think himself a mighty monstrous fine fellow. Not drive the mare ! I am thankful to say I’m not quite laid on the shelf yet !’

‘You had much better take advice,’ called out Mrs. Lawrence, the conversation being carried on in high tones, she from the middle of the room and he from the window. Disdaining to answer the last remark, he marched off. Lucy was not in the room, and Mrs. Lawrence said to Nelly, ‘I do wish your father would not be so obstinate.’

‘It’s all right. George is absurdly fidgety. However, if you like, I’ll go with him, and Uncle Tim can take out Lucy.’

‘Well,’ said her mother regretfully, ‘I suppose you had better ; though it is hard upon poor Lucy that she should always be sacrificed.’

Nelly, rather pleased at her exchange of duties, left the room, and proceeded to the stables. On her way she met Major Macarthy, and imparted to him what was going on.

‘Did you ever hear such nonsense? But George has succeeded in frightening mother, so one must give way.’

‘I think I’ll go with your father myself,’ said Major Macarthy, with his blue eyes fixed meditatively upon her.

‘No, that’s not fair ; you’ve got to entertain Lucy. You don’t pretend to say,’ she continued, changing her tone, ‘that you’re going to set up fidgets, too?’

He laughed.

‘You may drive me as much as you please, Nell, but—as George feels so strongly about it with his father, I don’t think it would be quite fair on George. If you don’t mind, I’d rather go.’

She made a face indicative of extreme disgust.

‘I don’t know what’s coming to the house!’ she said. ‘What on earth am I to do with Lucy?’

‘Row her over to Ditton. I wish you’d see whether old Mrs. Ellis’s blackbird likes his new cage. Is your father at the stables?’

‘I expect so.’

They found the rector, still angry, superintending the putting-in of the mare.

‘Never heard such a thing in my life!’ he exclaimed, divided between the desire to give vent to his feelings, and unwillingness that the stable-boy should be aware of his humiliation.

‘I should like to know who taught Master George all that he knows?’

‘Where are you going?’ asked the major.

‘Over to Stoke, to see Harris—if I am allowed,’ in a low voice charged with thunder.

‘That’s unlucky.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I wanted to see Harris myself, about that Post Office business.’

Mr. Lawrence glanced sharply at him, but he was innocently engaged in altering a buckle of the harness.

‘Well, you’d better come,’ the rector said in rather a grudging tone.

‘I’ve got to row Miss Winyeatt about.’

‘That’s another of George’s arrangements, I suppose! I wish he’d leave other persons to manage their own business.’

‘I can take Lucy out, Uncle Tim,’ said Nelly, feeling herself magnanimous.

‘Yes, of course she can,’ said her father,

pleased that one of his son's plans should be upset; 'of course she can! You'd better come, Tim.'

'All right—I will.'

They started with Toby curled round at his master's feet, the rector driving, and the mare showing no more freshness after a day in the stable than a certain alertness of ear and a slight inclination to start; against which Mr. Lawrence was well on his guard. His wrath was not yet exhausted, though there was satisfaction in not having yielded to feminine pressure, and he launched forth angrily upon the folly of wives and sons, the conceit of the young, and the weakness of women, saying, of course, a good deal more than he meant.

Having had his fling, he soon calmed down, and both he and the major loved every inch of the lanes along which they were driving, and felt the charm of the quiet

autumn afternoon. There had been a high wind the day before, which had completely died away, and now there was that hush which often comes in autumn, and which at no other time is so expressive. Trees, hedges, fields, lay bathed in golden sunshine; the smoke from the cottages mounted straight into the air; the white clouds which heightened the tender blue of the sky rested upon it without any visible movement. Over a hedge appeared the broad back of an old white horse, so roughened by age and reddened by rolling that it looked like a piece of the road; further on a labourer was cutting 'brimmels' in the bank, a woman with basket and white apron stopping to chat with him. The rector was popular, but the major was beloved; no man, woman, or child but had a bob or a cheery Good-day for him, and more than once they had to pull up to hear the story of some of those they met. Once it was

a strange superstitious tale of an old mother-in-law having 'ill-wished' a cow, and the cow dwindling away in consequence, until some man brought a charm and found out the cause of the sickness. Major Macarthy exerted all his eloquence in vain—she didn't believe in witchcraft, but her cow had been overlooked, and she forgave her mother-in-law as a Christian, but she'd never speak to her again—never!

'Oh yes, you will, Martha,' said the major, cheerily; 'you'll go home and think of what I've said, and read a chapter, and by to-morrow you'll be thoroughly ashamed of yourself.' As they drove on he said to the rector—'Poor souls, they don't mean half the ill things they say.'

'You're a great deal too easy, Tim,' said the rector, scandalised, 'and there's no use in my saying anything when you're by.'

So they drove on along the network of

lanes, some narrow enough to cause the uninitiated mind to wonder how things on wheels could ever pass each other, and others so beautiful with bordering of tiny streams, and freshness of grass and cress, kept cool through all the languors of summer; with clusters of blackberries, and higher up the crimson tints of haws, and sharp touches of yellow or red where a leaf has felt the first nip, that it was impossible to quarrel with the high banks and loss of wider outlook. The mare had behaved on the whole very well; she showed an inclination to start at any unexpected noise, but the rector was on his mettle and kept her well in hand. The farm at Stoke, to which they were going, was only about four miles distant, but the road, it is unnecessary to explain, was hilly, and they took it easily, both really enjoying the drive. Reaching the farm, a stout young labourer took charge of the dog-cart, and they walked

over the farm with Harris, who was full of complaints. The major had a dozen suggestions for tilling, and ensilage, and new kinds of fodder, to all of which Harris listened with easy distrust in the large profits which were flaunted enthusiastically before his eyes. He held some portion of glebe land, where he now had sheep, and his aim was to reduce his rent. The major would have yielded even in the very height of triumphant proving how greatly the land had been improved, but the rector, perhaps braced by remembrance of his wife, was disposed to hold out. He would have liked to have said that his son would walk over and talk about matters, but his pride had been too much wounded to allow this. He half gave way, at the same time postponing his decision, and Harris lounged out with them to the gate, his hands in his pockets, and a general air of indifference and want of energy about him which is not un-

known in west country agriculture. He admired the mare, but with a doubtful hesitation, and the rector and his brother-in-law drove homewards somewhat crestfallen. When they had gone half a mile Mr. Lawrence pulled up.

‘I’ve half a mind to go round by Winborough copse,’ he said. ‘It’s a goodish while since I’ve looked at it, and with the weather so fine we shall get the view at its best.’

The major assented, and turning back for a hundred yards, they struck into another lane and went slowly up a long hill. At the top of this hill the view they were in search of broke upon them—a fair and smiling expanse of wood and valley and softly swelling hills, sweeping away until it melted into the beautiful and dusky outline of the moor. But it was not earth which claimed their attention, but the sunset glory of the heavens. Spreading from the west right across the sky

lay countless ranks of tiny clouds, each touched by the rosy light of the moment, their infinite perspective opening such a vast idea of distance as mind refused to grasp, their exquisite and delicately varying colour almost satisfying desire. Nothing, indeed, could exceed the loveliness of this colour, resting, as it did, upon a clear background of sky, and all the details of country, wood and river, which usually attracted attention, were lost sight of in its intenser beauty. On the right side of the road was the copse which gave its name to the hill, and on the left, just where the rector drew up, was a gate, which, partly off its hinges, and more than three parts open, led into a field, at the further end of which a few sheep were grazing.

The two men sat and looked at the sunset, silent. The first to break this silence, perhaps involuntarily, was the rector, and he said under his breath what might have been

thought a strange thing. 'My God,' he muttered, 'what am I, that I should preach to them!' And then they were silent again, watching the faint shifting and brightening of the rosy tints. But there was always something for Tim Macarthy to do.

'If the gate is left open those sheep will be all over the place,' he said. 'I'll just get down and put it right.'

He was standing up with his foot on the wheel when a pheasant rose in the wood with a whirr, startled probably by Toby, who was hunting about on his own account. The sudden noise frightened the mare out of her senses; the rector had been sitting carelessly with dropping reins, and she wheeled round and dashed through the gate. The major was flung out, but clear of the wheel, the other wheel ran up a bank, and upset the cart, the rector falling underneath; and the post of the gate preventing the mare from

dragging the cart through, she became literally frantic with terror, kicking and plunging with all her might to rid herself of what was behind.

Major Macarthy picked himself up in a moment, not seriously hurt, but shaken and slightly confused. If this had not been so he might have rushed to the horse's head, but he was only clear enough to take in that the rector, lying as it seemed at the very heels of the animal, was in the utmost danger, and for Tim to understand this meant to fling himself into the danger, and without a thought of his own peril, try to drag out his brother-in-law's body. At this he worked away, until he received a kick on the left shoulder which knocked him down, and caused him exquisite pain. Struggling to his feet, and almost despairing of getting the rector clear, he tried with his one available hand to cut the nearest trace, and succeeded. But as he did it and

stooped for a last effort, the mare struck out with even more frantic force, knocked him over, extricated herself from all but a portion of the cart, and dashed wildly through the gate with this trailing behind her.

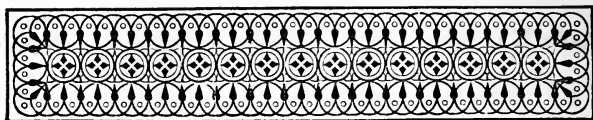
Where but a minute before had been violent struggling, all was still. The two men lay in the road, Mr. Lawrence still half buried beneath the pieces and splinters of the dog-cart, Tim Macarthy lying on his back, arms outstretched, face up, turned to the sunset clouds. The hoofs of the flying mare were no longer heard, the terrified sheep, which, as she came rushing towards them, had scampered to a far corner of the field, were now huddled there together, too frightened to move—it was all absolutely, ominously still. Presently Toby, who had been led away by the revival of old temptations, came back, shamefaced and depressed. He scrambled over the hedge, panting, became aware of

some strange condition of things, and advanced slowly, with head forward and low. Finding that it was indeed his master who lay there in this unaccustomed fashion, motionless and rigid, the dog sniffed over him uneasily, then ran to Mr. Lawrence and made quicker examination, with no better results. Then he went back to his chief friend, stood with paws on his chest, and ears inquiringly pricked, and licked his face—for was it perhaps a play, a game which was being acted for his benefit, and in which he should fulfil his part? He drew back with short uneasy bark, and stood with fore-legs advanced, ready to spring. ‘Wake up, master, you have had your surprise! I know all about it, and am waiting. Wake up, wake up!’

No voice answering, he grew more disturbed. Here was man—master and benefactor—lying inert, horse vanished, and only

he left to give help. He ran once more to Mr. Lawrence and scratched violently at his arm. This producing no better result than the rest, he sat down, lifted his nose in the air, and howled dismally with all his might. But as he was a small dog, his appeal for aid could not be heard far, and did not bring the help he wanted. Next he got up and ran a little way along the road, and came back whining, and licked Major Macarthy's hand, as if to ask for directions; none coming, he stood irresolute, one paw in the air, and then set off as fast as legs could carry, to seek for help, leaving the two behind him motionless still, the rector heaped together with harness and fragments, and the major lying with his face to the sunset sky, in which the lights had already somewhat faded.





CHAPTER XX.

That best portion of a good man's life,
His little nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love.—WORDSWORTH.



UST at the time that Mr. Lawrence and Major Macarthy drew rein to look at the view from the top of the hill, Nelly Lawrence and Lucy were climbing the steep street which led from the landing-place upwards. The two girls had been out on the river, and, beautiful as it had been there, they were mutually glad to have got it over. Lucy found it wearisome without George, and Nelly and she had few mutual subjects of conversation. Parish

details appeared trifling to her, while what she had to say in no way interested her companion. They had long silences; once, indeed, Lucy had slept. She was rather cross at having missed her tea, and only the self-restraint of appearances led her into occasional observations, as they toiled up between the cottages and their gardens, still gay, though looking a little more ragged in growth.

Before a red cob¹ cottage, which had a great outer chimney running up from the ground, a beautiful curve of thatch over a gable, and a fuchsia-bush reaching to the upper windows, Nelly stopped, saying there was a child there, ill, whom she wanted to see.

‘You won’t mind going home by yourself, will you?’ she added.

Lucy did not mind at all, rather she went on more briskly. She greatly preferred Mrs.

¹ Mud and straw.

Lawrence to her daughter; indeed, she was honestly fond of Mrs. Lawrence, liking her liking, and conscious of possessing her good wishes for what she was growing to have very much at heart. The sunset lights were all aflame, but she paid no great heed to them, nor to the soft shadows they cast upon the grass as she turned through the rectory gate, and ran up the steps. The instant she opened the study door, she saw that something agitated Mrs. Lawrence; she was walking up and down uneasily, and she looked anxiously at the girl.

‘Is Nelly here? Have you heard anything of the dog-cart?’

‘No—nothing. Haven’t they come back?’

‘No.’

‘You’re not uneasy about that? Dear Mrs. Lawrence, it’s quite early—they may have gone farther—there can’t be the least reason for alarm!’

She kissed her affectionately as she spoke, and the wife, with a smile and sigh at her own weakness, sat down in the chair to which Lucy drew her.

‘I don’t know what has come to me to-day—I believe I am quite foolishly nervous,’ she said. ‘George’s words have been ringing in my head, and then it irritated me to hear that Tim Macarthy had gone instead of Nelly—I could have trusted her to look after her father—and now I dare say the time has seemed longer than it really was, sitting here alone, with those dreadful birds coming to the window and tapping.’

‘Oh, poor little things,’ said Lucy, laughing. ‘They wanted their tea as much as I. I wish I had stayed at home with you, and given it to them.’

‘I wish they had never been encouraged to come into the house,’ returned Mrs. Lawrence, quickly. ‘Is the clock on the mantel-

piece right? I know Major Macarthy was meddling with it.'

Lucy compared it with her watch. 'It is quite right. A quarter-past six.'

'They have had plenty of time to go and come back. But, as you say, they may have gone elsewhere. Neither of them would consider the time. Where did Nelly take you?'

Lucy was neatly folding her veil, and placing it with her hat on the broad shelf of the book-case. She was thinking about George, and her anxieties were for his return, but she did her best to amuse his mother with an account of their row on the river, and with anything else she could think of. She took up a little case of miniatures at last, and asked who they were.

'That is the rector,' said Mrs. Lawrence, 'and those were cousins of his—sisters.'

'Isn't she pretty?'

'Oh no, quite the reverse. I think she

was the plainest woman I ever saw, and her complexion was like liquorice. But in spite of that, she was very much in love with my husband. There!—don't I hear wheels?'

She started up and went to the door. Lucy had to follow and soothe her as best she could, for there seemed no reasonable cause for her alarm, and indeed, she acknowledged this herself, while unable to take comfort from the knowledge.

'If only George were here!' she exclaimed more than once. Then she wished for Nelly, and her restlessness and nervousness became so painful that Lucy was thankful when Nelly walked in.

She treated the matter as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and for a time succeeded in quieting her mother; yet, as time went on, Lucy fancied that she, too, grew uneasy. She went out of the room more than once, on the pretext of satisfying

Mrs. Lawrence's fancies as to wheels, and one of these times she ran for a little distance along the road, and coming back, met the stable-boy also on the look-out. It was on her lips to despatch him to the farm at Stoke, but she changed her mind, and only told him not to be out of the way when he was wanted. When she returned to the house, however, she found her mother possessed by the same idea.

‘Somebody should be sent,’ she declared feverishly ; ‘somebody must go over and find out whether they have ever been at the farm. I can’t think why nobody has thought of this before. Nelly, will you see to it at once?’

To Lucy’s surprise, Nelly did not argue the question. She only asked—

‘Shall I ride over myself, or send William?’

‘Go yourself—no, I don’t know, you may be wanted—oh, I can’t tell!’ she cried, with a

burst of impatience. 'Do something—somebody, that is all I ask!'

Lucy, really frightened by her evident alarm, stole to her side and took her hand; Nelly stood in the middle of the room, gravely considering. As she turned at length, the door which she had left ajar was pushed open, and Toby, muddy, panting, and excited, ran into the room.

The dog was never allowed to come into the house, and it was plain to all that there was something significant in his unusual action. He ran to Nelly, whined uneasily, and then went back to the door, where he stood, evidently waiting for her to follow. Nelly turned pale and looked at her mother; Mrs. Lawrence had been pale before, now her face was ashen, but she had regained her self-command.

'The dog has come to fetch you, and you had better go yourself, and let William, and

any men you can see in the village, follow as fast as they can. Or stay ; it may be better for William to go for the doctor. Everything shall be ready here. One of the maids had better run to the Wyatts', and ask for their carriage.'

She gave these directions in a clear distinct voice, and Nelly silently nodded, and went quickly to the door, but as she reached it turned and came quickly back.

'Don't—don't fear the worst, mother,' she said brokenly.

'Go, my dear, go ; I shall be well taken care of,' said Mrs. Lawrence, pushing her slightly towards the door, Toby, who had been whining miserably, now barking for joy. William, the stable-boy, was standing on the steps, with a scared face.

'I couldn't stop 'un, miss ; he bolted right into the house. Looks as if something was wrong,' he said anxiously.

‘Put my saddle on the cob, and then go for Dr. James.’

Nelly gave her directions shortly, angry with herself for needing any help in the saddling, which she could generally do more quickly than William, but she was shaking now with excitement, and could not buckle the girths without difficulty. All this time the dog kept close by her, as if understanding that what was being done was not really loss of time ; and the instant she was up he ran gladly forwards, looking back at intervals to see that she was following, when here and there she stopped at a cottage and got what men she could find to run behind and see which road he took.

Meanwhile, at the rectory, Mrs. Lawrence's energy had not flinched. She called the servants, sent one to the Wyatts' for the carriage, bidding them find out at some of the cottages which way Nelly had taken. Every-

thing was thought of, beds prepared, hot water got ready; the energetic measures seemed to still the impatient restlessness of the past hour, and Lucy followed, amazed at the strength she displayed. But directly action stopped because nothing remained to do, and they were downstairs again, waiting and watching, she flagged and broke down. Nothing that the girl could urge, quieted her. It was impossible for her to sit down. She went from room to room, from hall to study, from study to drawing-room, then to the open door, where—for the dusk was gathering—the autumnal air struck in damp and chill. Lucy, frightened at this exposure, did her utmost to draw her back, but her words had no power, Mrs. Lawrence either did not hear or would not heed them. She talked, however, incessantly.

After a time she insisted over and over again that she heard wheels and voices. The

voices, no doubt, existed, for by this time alarm had spread, and men and women both were hanging about the rectory gate, or hurrying by to join in the search. 'They would do anything for the rector,' Mrs. Lawrence said once suddenly, almost sharply, to Lucy. But of wheels there was no sound, except once when a heavy cart lumbered by, and her breathless anxiety became intense; and when the strain of listening ceased because the creaking noise of the wheels, and the heavy voice of the carter, died away in the distance, she appeared almost beside herself, and frightened the girl. Then, too, she began to want to go out into the drive, and only yielded to Lucy's imploring entreaties when the girl offered to go herself, and after that Lucy had frequently to run out, until she became so frightened and chilled that she scarcely knew what she was about or how much time had passed.

Once she followed Mrs. Lawrence into the study, and found her sitting in the chair at the writing-table, shaken by tearless and convulsive sobs.

‘Oh, Mrs. Lawrence, don’t, don’t!’ Lucy cried, terrified almost to distraction. ‘It mayn’t be anything very bad.’

‘Yes, it is. I know it—I feel it here—in my heart.’ She turned up a white wan face to the girl. ‘George warned me, and if I had only been more careful—instead of irritating him—he could always be led——’

‘It may not be Mr. Lawrence at all,’ hazarded the other. ‘Perhaps Major Macarthy is hurt.’

‘Tim?’ Mrs. Lawrence almost smiled. ‘Oh, you needn’t suppose that; he always contrives to fall on his legs! No, it is Henry. I knew those dreadful birds would bring some misfortune.’ She got up and for the twentieth time went and stared at

the clock. 'How many hours have they been gone?'

'Not hours. Not an hour.'

'I hear—I am certain I hear something!'

This time she was right. There were sounds, unmistakable sounds, and she put aside Lucy's detaining hand and ran out, but stopped on the steps, helpless. It was almost dark, and through the gathering gloom some one, a man, was riding up to the door. It was the rector. He turned to look round, and then got stiffly off. His wife, who was leaning against the door-post, uttered an inarticulate cry, and he hobbled up and kissed her, still holding the reins.

'Frightened, Fanny?' he said in a strangely changed, dull voice. 'Yes, I'm afraid, I'm afraid it's a bad business, though they wouldn't tell me.'

'You—are you hurt?' She was clinging to him.

‘Only a bit knocked about. It’s Tim, old Tim—oh, my God!’

He staggered and dropped the reins. The cob shook himself and went round to the stable. With the man’s need the wife’s control came back.

‘Come in, Henry,’ she entreated, drawing a long breath. ‘We have sent for Dr. James. He cannot be long. Everything will be done.’

‘He is with them. He met us. It was all my cursed carelessness!’ He shuddered, but suffered himself to be drawn into the hall, leaning on her shoulder. Lucy flew upstairs again to see that all was ready and candles lit, but as she was coming down again stood grasping the baluster rail. There was the sound of wheels. What was it that had come? Her nerves were shaken by the strain of watching Mrs. Lawrence, and infected by her anxiety, she was shivering too, as much from

cold as from terror. The carriage stopped. Then came the noise of heavy shuffling feet, of low voices. She crept down to the hall. Some one was stretching up to pull down the bolt and to open the second half of the front door, there were more steps, and the next moment the hall seemed full of figures. No one heeded her, and hardly a word was spoken; the doctor gave a few directions and Nelly ran quickly upstairs; then four men, with their burden, followed her, the hall seemed to be suddenly cleared, to have nothing left but dim shadows—awfully suggestive. Mrs. Lawrence had drawn her husband back into the drawing-room; he sank heavily upon a chair, with a groan.

‘Are you sure you are not much hurt?’ she asked anxiously.

‘Sure? I’m sure of nothing,’ he muttered. ‘No, Fanny, I don’t think there’s much amiss with me. I wish there were,’ he added.

‘Don’t—don’t!’

‘Tim was worth a dozen of me,’ he persisted doggedly. Then he leant forward, holding his head with his hands. She hardly dared ask another question, but the silence, only broken by sounds overhead, kept all her nerves at an almost unendurable strain. She said at last—

‘Tell me something. Was he—was Tim driving?’

The rector lifted his head and stared at her.

‘No—don’t you understand that I was the fool? I was sitting with the reins loose on the mare’s neck, when she wheeled round like a shot. Has anything been heard of her?’

She shook her head.

‘Then how did you know? How came you to send?’

‘The dog came back. It was wonderful. Evidently he wanted some one to go with him.’

The rector raised his hands. 'I might have thought it,' he said. 'It was only another of Tim's friends. God help us! When will James be down? Where's George?'

'Gone to Plymouth.'

'Oh, ay, I remember. And left word I was not to drive the mare. He knew me better than I knew myself—but he should not have said *that*.'

The sting still rankled.

'He did not, he did not!' cried his wife, in tears. 'It was my ungracious way of putting it. Don't you know how often I speak like that?'

He took her hand in his, and patted it.

'There, there, don't cry, Fanny. He'—with a motion of his head—'he was the one to smooth over things. The sweetest, kindest nature——' He stopped, half choked, and leaned back in the great leathern chair, look-

ing so ghastly in the dimly-lit room that she started up and went hastily to the door.

‘When will Dr. James come? I am sure you want him. I would get you another coat, for your own is torn in strips, but I can’t leave the room, and not a servant comes near one!’ Then she came back to his side. ‘Do lie down!’

‘I am very well here. Only confused with the blow on my head, and the bruises. Tim was getting down when it happened, and got pitched out. Then the cart turned over with me under, and I don’t know any more, till—till I came to myself and crawled out, and there he was lying—on his back.’

‘Where was the mare?’ asked Mrs. Lawrence in a low voice.

‘No sign of her.’

‘But—just being thrown out—surely that would not—would not——’

He groaned. ‘No, it was more than that.’

I've thought it over, and I can see it all as plainly as if I had been told. The cart was stuck in the gate with me under it, and the mare, pretty well out of her senses, pounding away at what was behind her. I expect it was she disabled my leg. Tim had his knife in his hand—open, and a trace was cut—he did that—to save my life, and it cost him his own—dear old fellow!’ The words ended in a sob, but the next moment he said eagerly, ‘Here’s James!’

The doctor himself looked like one who had received a shock. ‘I should have come before,’ he said, ‘but Miss Nelly wanted a little looking after. She has been very much upset by this terrible business.’

‘Is there no—no——’ faltered Mrs. Lawrence.

‘No hope?—None. Death was in all probability instantaneous—caused by a blow, a very heavy blow, I should suppose a kick.

I dare say you will be able to tell us something, Mr. Lawrence,' he went on gravely, 'but I must have a look at you first. Your knee is hurt, I see. Can you walk? Well, then, we will try to get you upstairs.'

Lucy, who was really exhausted and terrified, had flown to her room, and with some difficulty had got hold of Martin, who brought her some tea, and tried to persuade her to lie down, being desirous herself of returning to the tears and wondering comments of the kitchen, where several of the men who had assisted in the finding, had gathered. But the girl was too feverishly anxious for this, and all that Martin could do was to pour out what she had been able to hear, and more, which an innate desire to pile horror upon horror, created. When the men got to the place, she said, they found the rector crying like a child, and Miss Nelly down on her knees by her uncle, trying to

raise him. But they said all of them saw how it was the moment they looked at him. Miss Nelly had been fainting away, and like one distracted ever since she came home. By-and-by she reported that the rector was in his room, and Morrison had told her that he was in a very low way, and Dr. James thought very badly of him. Lucy sent her out again to gather what crumbs of information she could, but by this time William the stable-boy had come in with the news that the mare had been heard of, and Martin was so much interested in all he had to say that she did not return. Lucy grew sick and cold with solitude and suspense, until at last she could bear it no longer, and slipping on a cloak ran out into the passage and down the stairs to see if Mrs. Lawrence was in the study. Each room was empty, and looked strangely unoccupied; so that she shrank back, and crept half-way up the stairs again. She did

not know where to go, no one needed her, and the house seemed full of dreadful things ; she wanted some pity, some sympathy, for herself. If the doctor came out, he might give it to her ; at any rate, would tell her something. So she sat down on the stairs and waited, hearing hurrying feet in the passages above, and the opening and shutting of doors, but otherwise left in solitude.

A quarter of an hour later came the sound of wheels. Some one ran up the steps, opened the door, closed it again, and stood for a moment in the hall, looking round as if uncertain where next to go. In the confusion the lamp had not been lit, and the hall was full of dark shadows faintly pierced by the dim light which stole out through the open doors of the sitting-rooms. It was plain that they were empty, and George Lawrence, dragging off his coat and driving-gloves, was going upstairs two steps at a time when a

dark white-faced figure rose up before him and caught his arm.

‘Oh, Mr. Lawrence!’ cried Lucy, piteously.

He could perceive that she was trembling all over, and in the shadow she looked very small and wan, while he felt that she had gone through all the awful trouble he had been out of. A great pity seized him.

‘Yes, I know—I have just heard—don’t try to tell me,’ he said gently, holding her hand in his. ‘You ought not to be here, you poor child—you are shivering.’

‘It is all so dreadful!’ she murmured brokenly.

‘Isn’t there a fire in the study? Come, let me take you there first.’

She made a step forward obediently, then clung to his arm—

‘I can’t—I am shaking so—I will stay here while you go to them.’

‘No,’ he said decidedly; ‘you mustn’t stay here. Now try.’

He put his arm round her, and half helped, half carried her down the stairs, placed her in the great arm-chair, and wheeled it over to the fire, now become very low. As he did this his mother appeared at the door, and stood still in astonishment.

‘George,’ she exclaimed, ‘I heard wheels, but you did not come!’

‘I found this poor child half perished on the stairs,’ he said gravely. ‘I should have been with you in another minute.’

The momentary pang of jealousy passed. Mrs. Lawrence came forward and kissed the girl fondly.

‘No one has thought of her,’ she said, ‘and she was so much to me through that terrible time of waiting! Oh, George, what it has been!’

Instead of answering, he drew over another

chair for his mother, made up the fire, and rang the bell.

‘You must both have something to eat,’ he said.

Mrs. Lawrence shook her head.

‘You must—here by the fire ; and keep something hot for me. I am going upstairs.’

‘To your father?’

He did not directly answer. ‘How is my father?’ he asked.

‘Dr. James insists upon absolute quiet. Don’t let him exert himself, George. He was stunned and his knee was injured, but it is more the shock which the doctor dreads. If you will be very careful, I will stay here for a short time with Lucy. Everything is in a whirl of confusion in my head. And there is poor Nelly!’

It seemed as if she could not speak of the chief trouble, but neither could she rest. Lucy, impatient of her own weariness, and

longing either to be in bed or that George would come again, watched her pacing up and down the room with restless tired energy. Once she flung back the shutter and looked out. A breeze had sprung up, and the clouds, which at sunset had lain like ripples on a vast sea, were now hurrying across the sky, touched into silver light by the moon; the black masses of the trees flung long shadows on the grass. What did she see besides? What harsh judgments, what sharp words rise up—God forgive us!—at such hours! Mrs. Lawrence hastily closed the shutters and came and sat down by Lucy, trembling. Presently, as she looked at the girl, something seemed to strike her.

‘You look very white, my dear,’ she said. ‘George was right. Where did he find you?’

‘I was sitting on the stairs. I thought perhaps I should see Dr. James, and hear about you all.’

‘Dr. James left some time ago. Poor Lucy,’ said Mrs. Lawrence, tenderly, ‘this is a sad experience upon which you have fallen! I am glad that George came and found you.’

‘He was very good to me,’ said Lucy.

‘He would be—he should be. I don’t think he would fail any one in such distress, and certainly not——’

She paused. It had been on her lips to say more, for all she had seen, that evening, had confirmed her previous impression. What stopped her was rather the sense of that Presence in the house, that hush which seemed to rest upon word and action, than the hesitation of doubt. Lucy, who had been leaning eagerly forward, sank back again. Mrs. Lawrence began to speak in broken sentences of what had happened.

‘That it should be Tim!’ she said hastily; ‘that is what I can’t understand—it never seemed possible that anything so terrible

should happen. He has had so many escapes—and always came out safely.'

'He was trying to save Mr. Lawrence, wasn't he?' Lucy asked wearily. Mrs. Lawrence started up from her chair as she spoke, as if the words stung her.

'Oh, my God!' she groaned.

Just then Morrison brought in coffee, and she consented to sit down again, and to drink it, more to please Lucy, who was exhausted for want of food, than because she was herself inclined to take it. And at the end of a few minutes she hastily got up and said she must go and look after Nelly and Mr. Lawrence.

'I shall send George down,' she added. 'See that he has some food.'

He did not immediately come, and Lucy lay back in her chair, having coaxed the fire into genial warmth, and thinking a good deal of Mrs. Lawrence's interrupted speech. The

first shock had passed, and her own self-consciousness was taking its prominent place again. Still, when George came in, the look in his face for the moment chased it back. He smiled, however, when he saw her.

‘Come, this is better,’ he said kindly. ‘I was afraid you were going to be ill.’

‘It was very silly,’ she answered, ‘but you can’t think how dreadful it was to hear nothing, and to feel oneself of no use whatever.’

‘My mother says, on the contrary, that you were the greatest comfort to her. It was most unfortunate that I should have been away.’

‘How is Mr. Lawrence?’

‘He is awfully cut up, and so is poor Nelly.’ He turned away, so that she could not see his face. ‘There isn’t a soul in the place but will miss him.’

‘Oh, I know, I know!’ All the best part

in her was uppermost again. 'I wish you knew how sorry I am for you all!'

'Thank you. I am sure of it.'

He said it very simply, but she read a good deal in the words, and her heart beat.

'Was—was it true that it was in helping Mr. Lawrence?'

'I dare say—I don't doubt it. I dare say that will come out at the inquest, but my father seems to have no doubt about it; and it would be just like him, dear old fellow!' he added, unconsciously repeating the rector's words.

'At least,' she said softly, 'he did not suffer.'

'No—thank God! There's no suffering in his face. He might be asleep. And there's the dog, curled up. I don't know how he'll be got away, unless—yes, perhaps he'll go to Nelly. Poor Nell!'

His thoughts were with the dead—not with her : she began to think how she might draw them back, but he went on—

‘Nell and my father always did him justice. My father says there was never any one so loved. And to think that just one minute, one——’ he got up and began to walk about the room as his mother had done. Then he came back and stood looking down on her. ‘It’s very hard on you.’

‘What?’

‘To be mixed up with our trouble.’

‘Don’t—please don’t say that!’

‘Well,’ he said with a smile, ‘I won’t. Women are so made, I believe, that it’s a real pleasure to them to comfort others.’

They were silent again. His thoughts had flown off for a moment’s respite to Norma, hers were occupied on him. He sat down in front of the fire, took the poker, and attacked a large piece of coal.

‘Are you sure you are warm now?’ he asked.

‘Quite. Is the evening really chilly, or is it only the—the shock?’

‘It changed a little after sunset. Did you see that sunset? My father says they were looking at it when all this happened.’

‘I believe Mrs. Lawrence begged them not to drive that horse,’ Lucy said timidly.

‘I ought to have stopped it more decidedly,’ he said very gravely. ‘I blame myself—I shall always blame myself. It hurt my father to have it supposed that there was danger, but that should not have stood in the way.’

She said hastily—‘Oh, you mustn’t dwell on that!’

‘Mustn’t I?’ He appeared to consider. ‘I don’t suppose I shall, after a time. It doesn’t take long to jostle one’s remorse out of the field, or—it doesn’t with me. I haven’t

Mrs. Winyeatt's tender conscience.' For the life of him he could not resist this allusion.

It was not more than Lucy had often heard before, but something in the tone, or, as is rather likely, in her own wrought feelings, and in the circumstances about her, brought his love for Norma home to her with a conviction that was absolutely new. If he had looked at her he might have been startled by the straining terror in her eyes. All that her vanity had whispered, her self-love had cherished, was in that moment struck into nothingness, and the effect was no longer what it would once have been. It was more than mortification, it seemed while it lasted to stop the beating of her heart. When Lawrence, who had been staring moodily into the fire, looked round, he was struck by the extreme pallor of her face.

'I ought not to keep you here,' he said,

starting up ; ‘ you are not fit for it. Let me light your candle.’

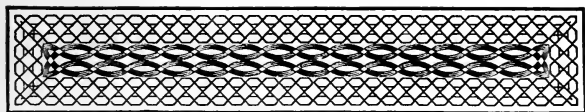
She assented silently, for she felt like a person stunned, and the room reeled round as she walked to the door.

‘ Shall I call your maid ? Can you go to your room by yourself ? ’ demanded Lawrence, anxiously.

Five minutes before, how sweet this anxiety would have been !

‘ Thank you,’ she said, trying to steady herself, ‘ I can manage very well. Good-night.’





CHAPTER XXI.

Blessed is the man who has the gift of making friends. It involves many things; but, above all, the power of going out of one's self, and seeing and approaching whatever is noble and living in another man.—THOMAS HUGHES.

Y the next day the rector was better, and resenting his wife's endeavour to keep him upstairs, hobbled downstairs, and sat in his study writing. Nelly's physical strength also asserted itself, and, miserable as she was, she would not consent to spare herself. It was she, and she only, who could coax poor Toby away from the room where he kept his faithful watch, but more than once he broke away from her, and would sit at the door with bent head,

listening, until some one took pity on him and let him in.

George Lawrence had much to do and many arrangements to make, the more so as the rector had lost his self-reliant manner, and turned to him for all decisions. Early in the morning the mare was brought home, a good deal cut about the hind-legs, but otherwise unhurt. And in the course of the day there was the inquest, to which it was necessary the rector should be driven, the doctor coming to fetch him in his carriage. And from this time forward one long stream of people came dropping in at the rectory, making their way upstairs to the place where the man who had loved them lay. When Mrs. Lawrence first gathered what the sounds overhead meant, she started up, but her husband laid his hand on her arm.

‘Let be, Fanny; let be. It is what he would have wished.’

‘But—I saw that great bold Ida Coombes pass by! Is everyone to go up?’

‘Everyone. It is his last speaking to them. Nelly is there, and I think George; they will see that there is nothing disorderly, but I have no fear. I wish when I die I might have such mourners,’ he went on, breaking down at his last words.

George Lawrence never forgot that afternoon. The little room, barely furnished, faced the west; the sun was already sinking, and Tim Macarthy lay facing it, on his narrow iron bed. No illness had wasted the features, and if any suggestion of weakness had marred them while he was living, death, which brings out what is best and greatest in a man, now showed them touched with a high nobility. The people came up by twos and threes—old women, old men, strong weather-beaten fishermen, little children. The men stood, looking gravely down, twirling their

caps between their horny fingers; they had given up their fishing to come and see him once more. The women pressed forward to lay flowers on the white sheet, and, as they did so, broke—many of them—into sobs. Not one of them but had a good word for him, some act of kindness to tell. The boy for whom he had made the crutches was there. Old Tom Fredericks, surly as ever, had crawled painfully up from the Creek. A woman came hurriedly in and knelt down by his bed-side.

‘I was the last of you as spoke to ’un,’ she said, ‘an’ I was that hard! He told me I should be sorry for it when to-morrow came, an’ God knows whether I’m sorry or no! But that won’t bring him back.’

No, there’s the sting.

All through that afternoon the people came and went. They had shown no hesitation from the first—it was as if he had

belonged to them, and they were his mourners by right. As the news spread up and down the river, they came from Rivermouth, from Stanford, from the little fishing villages where his face had been familiar. Nelly broke down at last and went away sobbing, but George, unutterably touched, stayed on and watched the solemn sunset lights once more rest like a glory on the face of the dead man. Cottage flowers were strewn all over him, without regard to colour or arrangement; the best roses, the finest head of geranium from the window-pots, shells and sea-weed, little faded bunches, glued together by the hot clasp of a child's hand.

It was dusk before the last man went away. He was a fisherman from a distance, and when he had looked for some time he turned to Lawrence and put out his hand.

‘Good-evenin’, and thank ’ee, sir,’ he said.
‘This here’s the first time him and me ever

met that he hadn't a kind word to say to me.'

And then he too went. The dog, who had been in the room, miserable and uneasy, all the time, ran after him to the door, and came back whining piteously. Some one came in, lit the candles, and drew down the blind, which had been purposely raised. George went and stood by the bedside, in his turn gazing. This then was death, that strange familiar presence, part of ourselves, and yet, in spite of the heritage of ages, alien, incomprehensible! Cold, rigid, senseless, uncommunicative. Was this all? Spite of faith, spite of reason, the question will come, will force itself upon us with affright, at the time when we are brought face to face with ourselves as we shall be. It rose up before George Lawrence now, but even as it rose, in the very smile of the dead man there came the conviction of the triumph of life. It was

life not death which he had seen in that room that day—life, quickening other life, as only life can; dead, he yet spoke, and his spirit was among them. George smiled back at him as he covered his face with the sheet and went out.

Lucy had spent a wretched day. She was really ill with the strain and the chill of the previous day, but she was also miserable. Hitherto she had managed to persuade herself that what she had made up her mind to like actually existed; she had persisted that Lawrence's feeling for Norma was no more than a passing fancy, in which she at any rate shared. But whether from her own feelings having deepened, or that when we are brought, as she had been brought the preceding day, face to face with a great reality, the shams and littlenesses in which we encase ourselves fall away and leave us more open to receive truth—from one cause or another, Lawrence's few

words had come upon her with a force which she could not resist. Whether or no Norma would listen to him was another matter. Once, indeed, it had seemed all-important, but not now ; now, it was his attitude, his love which was all. This love, which, unattainable, had suddenly grown the most precious thing in the whole world, haunted, possessed, mocked her. *On ne badine pas avec l'amour*, it will revenge itself upon those that slight it, it tossed poor Lucy about like a shuttlecock.

Nor could she escape. No one wanted her except Mrs. Lawrence, and she could hardly endure to be with George's mother, knowing, as she did, what was in her mind as to her son. And Mrs. Lawrence was greatly taken up by her husband. One little incident of that day had upset them all.

It was five o'clock, and the rector had been persuaded to have some tea. They were all sitting silent in the study, when there came

a faint impatient tap upon the window-sill. Mrs. Lawrence started and turned white. Her husband laid down the paper he was trying to read and looked at her.

‘Tim’s birds,’ he said in a low voice.

She hesitated, went hurriedly to the window, drew up the blind a short way and lifted the sash. The robins flew away, but presently the boldest returned, hopped into the room, and began to pick up the crumbs. Mrs. Lawrence covered her face with her hands.

‘Yesterday I would not let them in,’ she said, ‘and at that very time!’

‘Yesterday will make us both kinder,’ said the rector thickly.

It seemed, indeed, as if it were so. Life would recover itself, habits—whether of speech or action—would reassert themselves, but something there was which could not be forgotten, something for which the men and women about would be kindlier and better.

When the day of the funeral came, the people crowded to the churchyard, fishermen in their blue jerseys carried him to the quiet place where he was to rest: the strangest mourners were there, a child hugged a puppy the major had saved from drowning, Toby, held by one of the servants, strained to get nearer. All through the day there were those who came, and wept, and told stories of his goodness.

Mrs. Lawrence could not go, and Lucy was glad to stay with her. The girl was heavy-eyed and dull; she knew that it would be better she should go away, but her heart failed her. She was torn by hopes and fears, but the hopes were like ghosts of their old selves, vanishing forms to which—do what she would—she could not give even the semblance of life. Such phantoms are among the dreariest we can raise; yet to Lucy just now they seemed her only friends, and when Mrs. Lawrence kissed her and said she should

be very grateful if she would stay, and make their sad house a little less sad for the rector and George, her heart leapt up to think that for a little longer she should be near him.

He was very much engaged. All the arrangements fell on him, and most of the letter-writing. Major Macarthy had few relations, such as he had were far away, but one cousin came to the funeral, and was naturally made over to George. Lucy did not see him alone until one day in the following week, when she had persuaded Mrs. Lawrence to walk for five minutes in the garden, and after she had gone in, stood still, looking drearily at the dead leaves on the grass before her. Lawrence, who was coming quickly round the house, stopped, struck by the weariness of her attitude and the paleness of her face. She was changed from the somewhat brilliant Lucy of the summer, and he felt a pang of remorse, though it would never have occurred

to him that he had anything to do with what he attributed entirely to the melancholy circumstances of her visit. Still, it was their trouble from which she suffered.

‘I don’t like to see you alone and looking so sad,’ he said at once. ‘What can we do for you? It seems ungracious to say that we ought to send you away, and yet——’

‘No. There is no “and yet,”’ she said, with an effort at brightness. ‘It is your mother who arranges her guests, and she has told me she is not tired of me. So it is of no use for you to throw out disagreeable hints.’

‘What would Mrs. Winyeatt say to us if she saw you?’

‘Norma?’ said Lucy, sharply; ‘why should Norma care?’

The words leapt out before she knew what she was about. She bit her lip, as she felt his look of astonishment.

‘If I know her at all, it would grieve her very much,’ he said gravely.

‘Perhaps you don’t know any of us,’ said the girl recklessly. ‘Don’t let us talk about my looks. Tell me whether all your dreary business is nearly at an end. I have not seen you—not really seen you—for a long while.’

‘There has been a great deal to arrange, although the outcome is very small,’ said Lawrence. ‘I could not have believed how little it takes to form a complication. My father is mixed up in a marvellous way. However, I begin to see daylight.’

‘How glad they must be that you are here!’

To this he made no reply. They were strolling along a gravel walk which led to the kitchen garden, and he said presently—

‘You don’t know how often I feel as if I must see Tim coming whistling along this walk.

Every place seems full of him, but the garden most of all. I wish poor Nelly could take pleasure in it again. No, Miss Winyeatt, I'm not so unselfish as I ought to be. I can't help being very grateful that you are here. You don't want to be told how fond my mother is of you.'

She gave him a look, and he went on—

'A great deal of pain is added to all this trouble, for her, because she never understood Tim. She was worried by his harum-scarum ways, and uneasy at his influence with my father. And now, when we think he lost his life in trying to save his, she reproaches herself bitterly, and is for ever harking back upon the little sharp speeches she may have made.'

Lucy was not thinking of Mrs. Lawrence, but she felt that sympathy was demanded of her.

‘One can understand that so well; but I hope—I think she is beginning to take comfort.’

‘You think so?’ he said eagerly. ‘You see my father was married before; Tim was a younger brother of his first wife, and there might have been—well,’ he added with a smile, ‘perhaps the best women are not incapable of a touch of jealousy?’

She glanced quickly at him. ‘No,’ she said.

‘I hope you are right about it. My mother takes everything rather hardly, and while she is so miserable, I hardly like having to leave her.’

There was a minute’s silence before Lucy said in a forced voice—

‘Are you really going away?’

‘Yes, I am. As I told you, a good many things have to be put straight, and to do this thoroughly I must be on the spot. Are you

tired? Ought you to go in?'—for she was leaning against a trellised archway.

'Oh, no. I am only lazy, or it is the weather, or something. Where are you going? To Dover?'

She put the question so sharply that he turned round in surprise.

'No such luck,' he returned. 'My business is of the most prosaic kind. But why—what made you think I was likely to make my way to Dover? Do you recommend it to me?'

'I? I recommend nothing. Only—you were speaking of Norma, so I could not tell what you had in your head.'

'No,' he said slowly. He was puzzled by her manner, and her words seemed to be charged with forces which he could not explain. Her face, too, was changed, and looked worn and—round as her cheeks were—almost haggard. He set it down to illness,

and walked silently by her side towards the house. Then she put another question—

‘When do you go?’

‘Probably in a day or two, but nothing is fixed. Now I must be off to Stanford, for my father will not be happy till that mare is out of the place, and there’s a man there who wants her for riding. She is just fitted for that. Will you forgive me for saying that I think you ought to rest and take care of yourself?’

Instead, however, of leaving the house at once, he ran upstairs to his mother’s bedroom. Mrs. Lawrence was lying in a long chair, a book on her lap which she was not reading, and she welcomed him with a smile. He plunged into the subject at once.

‘Mother, don’t you think Miss Winyeatt wants seeing to? She’s either ill or she’s going to be.’

‘Ill!’ said Mrs. Lawrence, startled.

‘Yes, I suppose so. Don’t you notice how changed she is—a different person from when first she came to the rectory? And though, no doubt, all this sad time has been a trial, still it was not a personal sorrow, as it is to Nelly. Yet Nelly does not show such alteration.’

His mother glanced at him. ‘I don’t think she is ill,’ she said slowly.

‘Then why does she look as she does?’

‘Sometimes girls—like other people—have troubles which fret them.’

He appeared to consider.

‘Of course. But do you suppose anything has happened since she came here?’

‘I am sure I can’t tell. She has said nothing to me which looks like it, but you must remember, George, that girls’ troubles are often imaginary. Why don’t you ask her the question yourself?’

‘I? She would certainly consider me an impertinent jackanapes.’

‘She would only feel that you took an interest in her. You do that, don’t you?’

‘Do what?’

‘Take an interest.’

‘Certainly; as a friend of her brother’s.’ Something of his mother’s meaning had flashed upon him, and he stood up square and uncompromising. But having begun, she was not to be daunted.

‘Only on that account? George, I have seen a great deal of Lucy since she has been here, and it would make me so happy if she were to be your wife!’

He burst into a laugh. ‘Is that what you really were driving at? My dear mother, if you knew all the circumstances of the case as well as Miss Winyeatt and I know them, you would see the absurdity of the idea!’

‘There is no absurdity.’

‘If not, there is a very serious obstacle. There is another person.’

‘Yes, Lucy’s sister-in-law—a woman entirely unsuited to you.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because I have gathered enough to judge. It will grieve me to my heart if you throw away the happiness you might have secured for a foolish fancy.’

Lawrence’s face darkened. ‘Anything but a foolish fancy.’

‘And you told me yourself that she did not care for you.’

‘Did I tell you that? Well, I tell you now that it would be worth while to wait all one’s life for—for the chance of winning her.’

There was an immense energy in his words, and his mother looked at him uneasily. Here was something against which she felt her own obstinacy might dash itself in vain. She nervously turned over the pages of the

book lying in her lap, and then said more gently—

‘It is a bitter disappointment to me.’

‘Ah,’ he said, with a change in his own voice which she noted, ‘wait till you have seen her!’

‘No, she will never equal Lucy. Lucy is the daughter-in-law upon whom I have set my heart. Who can you find more charming? I should be so glad to see her happy.’

He laughed. ‘Miss Winyeatt would not thank you for such a plan of happiness.’

‘Why should she not? Why should she be averse from it?’

‘Because,’ he said gravely, ‘she is aware of my feelings. I never made any secret of them.’

Mrs. Lawrence sat up and said with energy, ‘I believe you are altogether mistaken, George.’

‘I am not, I assure you. Indeed, I couldn’t be. I must be off; and I don’t know that this has been a very satisfactory talk, unless it disabuses you of fancies which I had no idea existed. Good-bye, mother ; take care of yourself. By the way, I must run up to London in a day or two.’

‘On business connected with——’

‘Yes,’ he said briefly. He did not tell her that there were debts to be paid, and if she suspected she would not ask. After he left her, she stayed, thinking, and a good deal perplexed.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

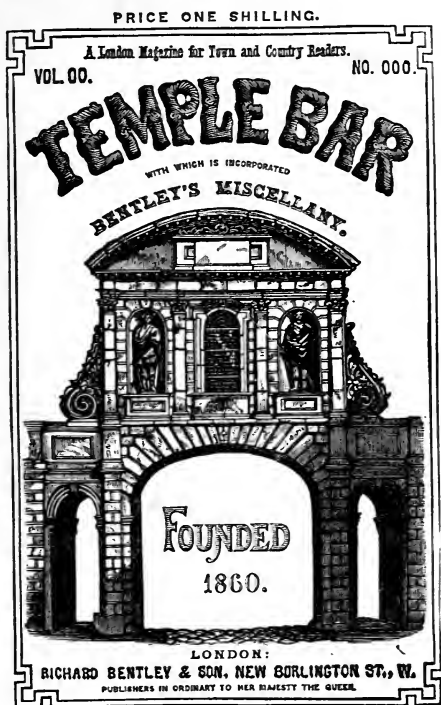
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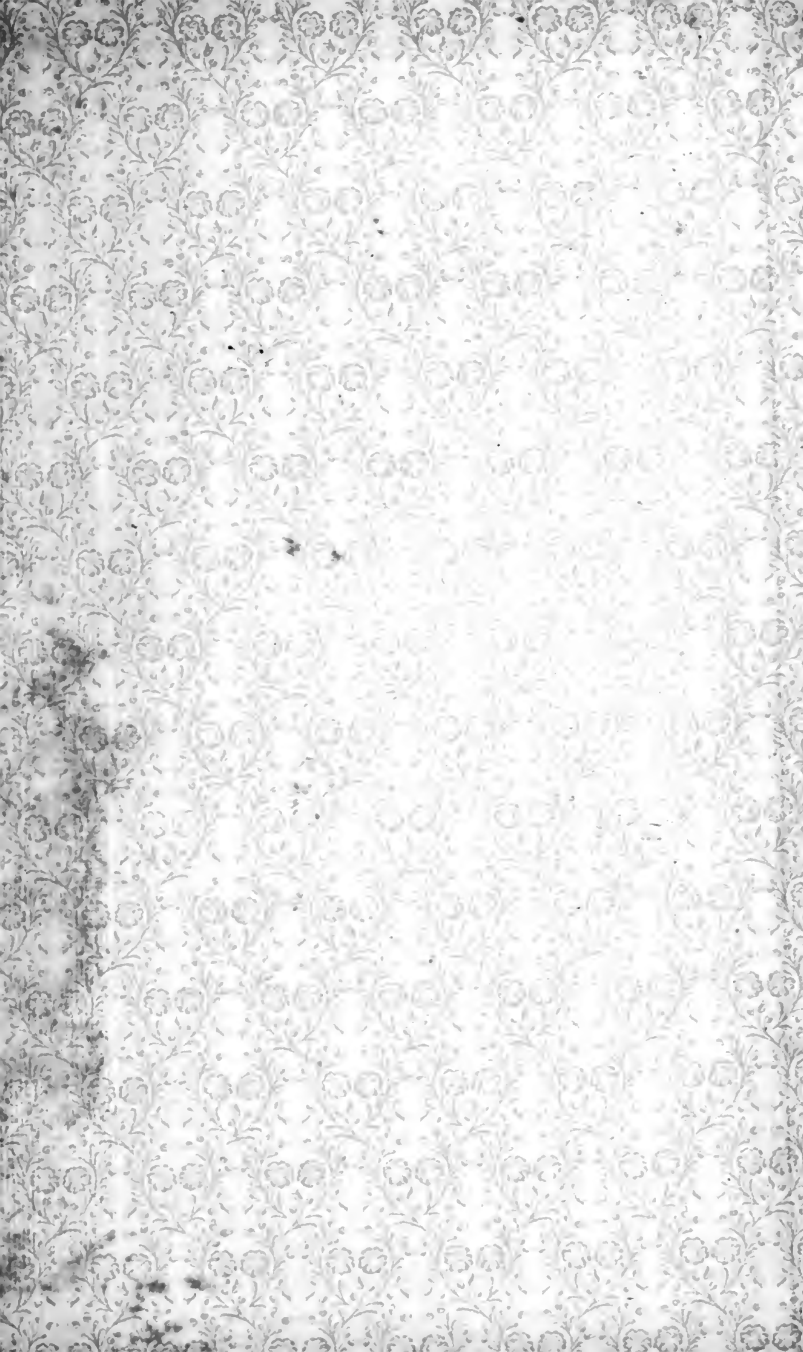
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